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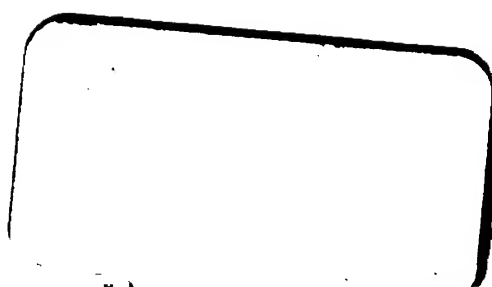
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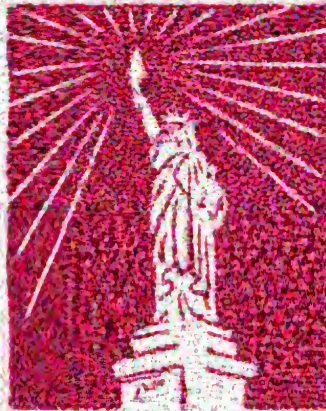
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Lt. Com. Max Miller

DAYBREAK FOR OUR CARRIER



OVERSEAS EDITIONS, INC.

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DAYBREAK FOR OUR CARRIER

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DAYBREAK FOR OUR CARRIER

by

LT. COM. MAX MILLER
United States Naval Reserve

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New York

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DAYBREAK FOR OUR CARRIER

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1

ON GOOD days, on days when everything is going just right aboard, and when the planes are taking off within their few second intervals—on those days a carrier sings. She is a symphony of engine thunder and colored signals. She is a ballet almost.

There are the bad days too. These are the days of discord. They are the days when the planes for no apparent reason start getting fouled on the flight deck or while being brought aloft from the hangar deck, or the elevators get blocked, or this or that, and nobody knows exactly the reason.

So if one were to describe an aircraft carrier accurately he should not be too grim about her or too overly concerned with where she has been or what she has done. Such notes may be all right so far as they go, but they do not go into the heart of the carrier herself.

A carrier can be so many things at once, all at once, that her very bulk and variety place her outside the realm of all other vessels we have come to know through the ages. Literature and romance already have classified Phoenician galleys, and have carried the classification on through square-riggers, through clippers, through the first side-wheelers, and on to liners and battleships.

But now comes a vessel so immense that her arms reach hundreds of miles from her body. The air is as much her realm as the sea. Clouds are as important to her as depth or current. She is, in brief, a sort of fourth-dimensional creation. She is both bird and barque. She is a new *thing*.

2

THIS vessel is a piece of the United States.

She became detached somehow from the mainland of America, and was speeded out here. She is a piece of the best of the United States. She is out here to help offset the shortage of landing fields in this mid-Pacific. She is a movable base zig-zagging between our own coasts and the coasts of the cunning enemy.

Islands cannot be made to float, it is said. But here is an American-made island, and her speed can be pushed if need be to well above thirty knots. We are all a part of her, as she is a part of the United States. Copper from Montana is in her. Steel from Pennsylvania is in her. Lumber from the mountains of Washington and from Michigan and from Minnesota is in her, too. A state cannot be named which is not represented in her somehow. The men aboard are from all these states likewise.

We are not lonely on this carrier, for we have brought our homeland with us. We have extended our homeland to out here beyond the date-line. We speed along ever westward for a coming engagement.

Exactly what turn the engagement may take, we do not know. What may be waiting for us there in ambush, we do not know either. But we have our own opinions, and we have our scuttlebutt. And we know, too, that on this attack we are going deep into the enemy's own front yard. This we know, for it has been told to us. It was told to us on the second day out.

We had had our guesses, of course, as to where we were going, and these guesses had proved rather accurate. They usually do. But during that lecture in the wardroom, and while facing

charts and diagrams, it had been fun pretending we were surprised.

The statement that we are not lonely may be assuming too much. It means we are not lonely in the sense of being Americans on foreign territory. This is our own territory, and our flight deck is almost the size of a homeland meadow. At least the flight deck is well over the size of a city block. Men on the stern appear tiny indeed from the bow. There is no recognizing them from such a distance. Nor will voices carry that far except through the ship's loud-speakers.

In the staterooms are the pictures of American women, of American girls, of American children, and of American babies. It is obvious that some of the young husbands aboard have not seen their own new babies except through these pictures. And some, especially the pilots and their gunners, may never see their babies at all.

But it is best not to think of that.

It is best for us instead to make this ship the fightingest ship there is, and to keep her that way. This is the trust of all those aboard. Nothing must happen to her. The flyers and their gunners are loaned to the air, so to speak, but they are still attached to us regardless of how far they go. These decks, this piece of America, comprise the flyers' lifeline, their home, their sanctuary—and their ammunition depot.

And each time the flyers land aboard, when they climb down from their cockpits, when they remove their paraphernalia, it's like overhearing a splendid prayer to overhear them say: "Hot damn."

3

A CARRIER may be a temporary innovation. Who is to know about that? Who is to know about the day after tomorrow, as measured by years, as measured by wars?

It may be that carriers will have served their purpose with this immediate era. After this war they may become museum pieces. Or relics. Something to be stared at on a Sunday afternoon by crowds curious to see a floating left-over of history. Planes may be so big then, and so fast, and with such great cruising ranges, that these subsidiary landing fields, these carriers, may be inessential.

But if future generations do stare on a Sunday afternoon at some preserved carrier, a hold-over from these Pacific days, the staring had best be performed with reverence. For what a purpose these carriers already have served to the nation! At least out here on the Pacific where, because of fabulous distances, carriers are so necessary.

But we aboard are not much concerned with such thoughts of the future. We haven't time for that. We are too busy preparing for this next engagement, too busy checking the shells and the bombs. It's quite a lift from the pit of this ship, from the bomb magazines, up to the flight deck, up to where each torpedo-bomber or each dive-bomber receives its quota, for daily practice or for keeps.

There is so much else to do too, and to keep doing, that this carrier herself, as she speeds along, seems untouched by all the arguments which have taken place ashore about her and her kind during past years. She is above all that. Her own

action speaks her worth. Her own need, as she plows westward, speaks it too.

What a different turn might the Battle of Midway have taken without carriers. And how much more prolonged could those dubious days have remained around the Solomons. Some of those grand carriers are dead now, sunk. But nobody, at least nobody on this task force, speaks with disrespect of those deaths. It would be like speaking with disrespect of those first terrible months themselves, those first desperate weeks. And it was right then, and immediately, when the few available carriers went out with whatever they had, which wasn't much, and helped put the stop to the enemy's tidal sweep in all directions.

Our few carriers then were under-armed for this type of war. Their escorts were pathetically few. But they stayed out at sea fighting. They continued fighting. And the war on the Pacific took a rightabout turn.

To have expected all of those carriers to come through unharmed, against such an avalanche of numbers, was an impossible hope. But the names of those carriers did not die with them. This is no figure of speech. This is literal. Their names are being carried today by their successors, which is only proper. Their names are represented in this same task force, on the offensive now, and going deeper and deeper west.

Aboard are a certain number of officers and men who were aboard those first carriers which went down in fight. It is always well to have such carrier veterans exchanged or seeded around this way. It helps with ideas, and it helps prevent over-confidence and under-confidence. Anybody who has been bombed overside into a burning sea isn't fooling when he wants his next anti-aircraft battery to be the best there is afloat. Ours has been trained into being just that, we think and we hope.

We are aware of how important we feel aboard this carrier.

We hold no false modesty in this respect. We know that this whole task force has been built around its carriers, and that this whole engagement will depend on us. Ours is the heavy role as well as the responsibility. We realize right well that the enemy if given a chance will try to get the carriers first.

"Get the carriers first."

The phrase has become a bromide, although a true one, with each side in this Pacific war. And the phrase is the sincerest compliment of all. No wonder, then, that we feel our importance. Not speaking as individuals, of course, but speaking of our ship of which each of us is a part. A thousand-thousandth part of the ship, to be sure, the same as the rivets.

4

THE signal PILOTS MAN YOUR PLANES is thrown from a teletype onto a small screen in the readyrooms, and sometimes the order also is sent over the loud-speaker into the same rooms. It is then that the waiting pilots, with whom you may be in the midst of exchanging the most outrageous of earthy stories, instantly become other beings entirely. It is almost as if they said: "Yes, a moment ago I was one of you. Now I am not."

The next time you see them you will have climbed up into the ship's island to view the take-offs from there. But meanwhile they will have vanished out a rear door of the ready-room while you have gone out another. It's this sudden separation for the take-off, quite complete and quite definite, which seems to segregate them so sharply from your own realm into another realm not for ordinary people.

Each laden down with his equipment (and there is a lot of it, including the chart-board, an automatic, a jungle-kit, a bag of yellow dye, a life jacket, a parachute, and so on), the pilots will have disappeared onto a dark and narrow catwalk beneath the flight deck. They will have filed across this catwalk as quickly as their loads and the darkness permit. When mysteriously they emerge again, as from a tunnel, they will be tiny strangers far across the flight deck from you.

You know them, and yet you don't know them. They are different people. Even their shapes are different, and their faces. The one thing common to all of them, as they run or stride toward their planes, is concentration. There is no by-play and no joking, and no waving of greetings either. Each mounts his plane and begins testing the gadgets in it.

The plane captains climb alongside the cockpits. The plane captains are enlisted men. Each has been assigned to an individual plane, and he is in charge of that one plane as long as it is aboard. He even may sleep in it at times. It's *his* plane. He's the trustee and guardian of it. The pilot is *his* pilot too. And now the plane captain assists his pilot in adjusting himself in the cockpit. There is so much to do, so many little things, and each of them of deadly importance.

There is the oxygen mask with its tube to be attached just right. There is the speaking-tube with its mouthpiece. There is the lifeboat-pack with the parachute. There are the goggles and the chin-guard and the helmet and the safety belt. All these things must be adjusted rapidly, accurately, for the next orders from the bridge mean business:

"Stand clear of propellers!"

"Start motors!"

But this is not the proper time to describe the whole operation of a take-off, with all its roars and its hurricane of wind-streams, and with our own suspense as each plane whirls down the deck for that final leap. This is not the time for that. It may come later.

This has to do, merely, with that strange moment, that quick moment, when these young men (but how old their faces seem) suddenly become transformed into different people. Within seconds they have been transformed from such as us into the magic characters of a childhood fable. And next they will be far aloft uniting with others of their own kind, their own squadrons, up there.

All of this seems part of the fable too. It seems almost as if they always had belonged up there, different beings, and for the past few hours had been down visiting us as a joke.

5

A FLIGHT deck in operation cannot be photographed truly except in colors. In the same sense that the silhouette of a carrier herself has violated all lines ever known to warship construction of the past, so too have the Navy costumes which are worn by her crews on the topside.

The nickname "Airedales," as applied to these crews, may not have come into being with the war, but it certainly came into being with carriers. Even now its precise scope as a nickname has not been definitely bounded. There are those of us aboard who insist the term "Airedales" comprises all members of our carrier's air force. There are others of us aboard who insist the word is limited to those amazing youngsters who, work-

ing in teams on the flight deck, bring order out of what could appear to be windy bedlam.

These crews are the ones who push the planes around. They are the ones who release the chocks from in front of the wheels. They are the ones who bound across the flight deck at each landing to release the landing contraptions while another plane is "in the groove" speeding in. They are the ones who jockey the towing jeeps from this end to that end of the flight deck, and who on hands and knees slide behind and around the whizzing propellers. And finally they are the ones who, on that wind-whipped flight deck, wear just about anything that will cling to them.

What mainly distinguishes a carrier from any other type of warship is, of course, this very flight deck. And what distinguishes this huge pasturage of a flight deck from any other type of deck is that here something is continually taking place. Nor has it to do mainly with polishing brass or scrubbing down or standing by for inspection. It has to do instead with the fury of handling some pretty important horsepower which is cyclonic in nature and strength.

Another name for these "Airedales," and a more limited one, is "Sheepdogs." And a flight deck would not be, could not be, worth taking to sea without them. They are youngsters. Aside from their colored and armless sweaters they wear just about anything that suits them best. For it is their own scalps which are being risked around the whirling propellers, and it is the seats of their own pants which go skidding along the deck behind the wind-streams.

The trick, when about to be blown away into another whirling propeller right astern, is for the "Airedales" to swing over upon their bellies as soon as possible, or sooner, and to claw their fingers into the deck's gratings. These narrow gratings,

not far apart, are primarily for use in lashing down the planes. It is doubtful if the designers had the "Airedales" in mind when these gratings were installed. But they have become as important to an "Airedale" as a parachute to a flyer.

The wheels of a carrier plane have to be chocked, or had better be chocked, before the propeller is sent spinning. And these same chocks have to be removed, or had better be removed, before the flyer starts for the take-off. This is all part of an "Airedale's" work. Nor on a crowded flight deck, with scores of planes within a limited space all warming up at the same time for the take-off, is there much room for the "Airedales" between the wheels and wings and tails and propellers and extra gas tanks and bomb racks. No, there isn't much room. But whatever room there is the "Airedales" on hands and knees and bellies have to find it. Besides, the planes are not staying in the same place. They are being signalled to their take-off positions at intervals measured by seconds.

All of this may be part of the reason why it seems as if all the old clothesbags of all the attics have been plundered to supply rags and shirts and caps and shoes to the flight deck crews. An enemy propagandist, for a fact, could consider using this clothing as evidence that Americans are now down to their last shreds.

But the colors of those sleeveless sweaters are something else. Whenever new batches are issued and freshly put on, the flight deck becomes a dazzling thing of reds, greens, blues, pinks, yellows—and sunburn. Each crew is given its own individual color. The purpose is not the joy of the thing, but merely that during the dizzy turmoil of handling the incoming planes, or in re-spotting them afterwards for another take-off, the "Airedale" crews may stick together.

There are ten such teams, perhaps, with each member bear-

ing the number of his team on the back of his sweater. It can be said also that a dozen or more of these youngsters comprise each team. The number is approximate, but this would be a guess when one sees them lined up one behind the other to be counted off. It must be said, too, that they don't stand in line very well.

Despite all the frantic work these "Airedales" (alias "Sheepdogs," alias plane-pushers)—despite all the frantic work they have just finished doing or are about to do, work which would cause the rest of us to feel our ages by not being able through exhaustion to feel anything else, these youngsters start in pummelling each other. This pummelling soon leads to wrestling, and this in turn leads to a sort of free-for-all specifically aimed at the guy who started it.

We elders, out of jealousy, may try at times to be cynical about such physical energy. We may breathe such phrases as "Ah, youth," and things like that. But there's really no use. The "Sheepdogs" have won. They've won us completely, they in their crazily colored cloth helmets, or in their caps resembling baseball caps, or in what resembles paintcloths tied around their heads, or in things resembling something never seen before. Their rickety trousers for the most part are the same way, or at least get that way by night.

Even the customary sailor white hats, when they are worn at all during work, are not the customary white hats any longer. They have been deliberately dyed by their owners into a mottled and questionable blue.



6

ONE should presumably start the description of a vessel by giving her length, and her tonnage and the date of her launching. Yet this is hardly the manner in which one becomes acquainted with a carrier, especially with a large carrier.

There is a difference, too, between going aboard as a visitor and going aboard to report as a member of the ship's company. The former may look at the strange vessel with curiosity, or with the impersonal detachment of a man viewing a circus. But when one for the first time reports aboard for duty, the peculiarities of the great vessel become not so much a curiosity as a downright problem of intricacies and size. They become his responsibilities. He must learn them rather than remain entertainingly mystified by them.

Nor on first reporting for duty is he presented with any gradual build-up, such as having the smaller things presented first. To the contrary, after mounting the gangway with his papers, he enters the biggest enclosure of all. He enters the hangar deck.

The outside of a big carrier, when viewed from a pier, may seem big enough for anybody's world. Unless vessels of a more familiar type happen to be nearby for comparison, one may even give up trying to figure her length. But by taking most of that whole length, and by putting a lofty over-all cover and sides to it, you will have a fairly accurate idea of a hangar deck's space.

The vastness, when seen for the first time from the inside, is the more pronounced because of the absence of uprights to break it. The hangar deck simply goes on and on, and over it

all, and far above, is the flight deck which may as well be the sky.

When this hangar deck is filled with planes, their wings folded, the spaciousness is not so bewildering. It is confusing, but not so bewildering. Yet when one first reports aboard with his papers, the planes are not likely to be there, but only the emptiness.

Before a carrier returns to port, her planes for the most part have been flown to some nearby landing field. Flight practice will continue from the field until the carrier puts to sea again, and the planes will rejoin her outside. The reasons for this are obvious, since a carrier has to be underway heading into the wind for both take-offs and landings. Nor would it be well to have all her planes tied up aboard in helpless idleness while the carrier is in port.

Yet it is in port, naturally, that one usually reports aboard the carrier for duty. So it is then that his first view of the hangar deck is much like a dream of entering some monster hall, the like of which could not exist except in dreams.

The morning some of us happened to be reporting aboard for the first time on this carrier, the sensation of weirdness was especially intensified. There was a reason for it, but we didn't know the reason immediately. The time was long ago, but we still remember that first half-hour of waiting. Indeed there are times aboard when we happen to be together again that we talk about that first half-hour. For our sensations, when compared, were about the same.

When a carrier is in port alongside a pier, the quarterdeck usually is about midships on the hangar deck. The main gangway leads to it, and we mounted with our papers.

"You'll have to stand by for a while," the officer-of-the-deck told us. "Something's going on."

He was too busy with 'phones to tell us just what. The side hatches were closed, blue and red lights were on, which may have intensified the eerie dimness of endless space. Along the opposite bulkhead, far across from us, we saw the shadow figures of two sailors carrying a wire litter. Lying in the litter was a third sailor. The procession moved soundlessly aft, and was followed in time by two more sailors carrying another wire litter. In it was another stretched-out man. The dim figures, so far away and so silent, could have been phantom pygmies.

We might not have felt so eerie about it all if only somebody from somewhere within this hangar deck had begun bellowing orders, in the manner we were accustomed to hearing orders bellowed.

We did hear a bos'n's whistle. The sound was far away. And another time we heard a bell ring at some remote distance. But other than these distance sounds, and other than the quiet procession of litters, the whole hangar deck seemed devoid of personnel.

But we were wrong.

At the sound of another signal, nearer to us, between a hundred and two hundred men appeared to come out of nowhere. They began moving rapidly in our direction. They had been aft somewhere on the hangar deck all the time, and we had not seen them. They were bearing fire hoses and buckets. All of them wore life belts and a few were wearing those white bunny-like suits with the big feet and the big hoods, the unmistakable suits of flame-fighters. But everything continued to be conducted with such a maximum of silence that, with the litters and all, the whole thing could have added up to something pretty awful.

But we knew the answer by now, of course. Yet to affirm it, within this seemingly endless hall of space, one of us said:

"Mmmmm. Looks like we've walked right into a fire drill, eh?"

The officer-of-the-deck nodded: "And as soon as 'all secure' sounds, I'll take care of your papers."

But by now even he looked little standing there by his 'phone.

7

It's the hard luck of a carrier that she never may lend herself well to romantic pictures. The island structure has a lot to do with this. For no matter how one views a carrier, this island structure looms up like an overbalanced after-thought, like an awkward hat worn on the side of a comedian's head.

Paintings of even the most primitive men-o'-war can make our carriers of today appear like unfinished creations. Not only that, but the island, sitting up there like a little ship on top another one, seems constantly apologizing for itself, for being in the way. It is as if the island had been placed aboard in such a hurry that nobody had the time to square it off, or center it, or make it appear as if it really belonged. It is as if the contractor had said: "Oh, yes. We forgot the island. Well, men, let's get it aboard as fast as we can for the time being. We can take care of it later."

Toy models of a carrier must not seem quite right even to children when they are shoving the models around on the floor. And yet children no doubt must be more familiar with the various carrier classes than are the children's parents. This is an assumption, of course. But as an assumption it is based on what today's children seem to know about planes.

Certainly, as concerns both planes and carriers, the boys of today appear in the enviable position of answering their par-

ents' questions instead of asking them. If so, it is not likely that the toy models of battleships or of cruisers or of destroyers can produce so many puzzles in a father's mind as can a carrier. It's up to the father, though, to remain a little cautious in his approach.

"All right, sonny, since this is a warship, can you tell me why it doesn't look like one? And what's this lump over here on the side for?"

"That, Daddy, is the island."

"Mmmm—errr—correct, my boy. Very correct. And now can you—mmmmm—tell me what's the island for?"

"Yes, Daddy, the island contains the navigation bridge, and it contains most of the instrument rooms, and it contains—"

"Well, never mind. I see you know, all right. Now, don't you think it's time for you to go to bed?"

"But, Daddy—"

"You trot off to bed. You can play with the boat again tomorrow."

There is, to be sure, a misleading sameness in the appearance of all carriers, despite their class or size. It's the sameness of their same old flat top. Regardless of the lines of their hulls, whether graceful or ordinary, it's the flat top of the flight deck which dominates the picture. And flatness, no matter where or what on, is still flat.

For this reason our most heroic carriers of this Pacific war never may become common on future calendars. They may never, for example, take the place formerly held by the old *Constitution*, or the old *Bonhomme Richard*, or the old *Oregon*, or such modern battleships as the *South Dakota* when the time comes, or the even more modern *Iowa*, or of such cruisers as the already celebrated *Chicago* and *San Francisco*.

The homely carrier, in other words, already has two strikes against her ever being in mural or glass bottle. Her deeds may be immortalized in future song or future poetry or future essay. But on seeing a miniature of even the bravest carrier, people of tomorrow are not so likely to exclaim: "Why, look, here's the old ——."

They would if they could, perhaps, but the people may as well be looking at the miniature of any one of a dozen carriers. The miniature will show the same old flat top with that same "something funny" stuck up on the side of her.

Even when a carrier is cutting the water at the furious speed of which she is capable, even then the carrier hardly seems to be moving. At least the onlooker is not so aware of the "bone in her teeth" as he is, for instance, in the pictures of the previously mentioned old *Oregon*, a tortoise by comparison.

For theatricality's sake, and for the sake of the pictures for posterity, a carrier perhaps should flounder around a little more. She should create a bigger splash. When going at her top speed, she still should not seem to be merely floating along, as if with the tide.

Not only that, but there are always her planes. No matter how fast she is going, the planes taking off from her, or returning to her, are going a good deal faster. By her own speed she may be creating the very head-on gale so necessary for these take-offs and landings. But nevertheless her offspring, these planes, seem to take pleasure by their own quickness in presenting their mother to the world as a doddering old step-and-a-half.

Designers in future years may find some answer. They may do something about the island's being where it is, and about its resembling a misplaced cargo on the side of a lofty raft. Yet,

for the time being at least, there is no hurry. Not in this war, anyhow. Not so long as this same familiar island can become for our ship's flyers the sweetest sight on all the seas.

From a great distance it's the island, sticking up there, which the flyer is likely to recognize first. The island doesn't appear funny then. Instead of resembling the undersized hat of a comedian, the island is if anything more likely to resemble the halo of an angel. But be that as it may, this first sure profile of the island is the first sure profile of home.

The flyer knows that inside that honeycombed island scores of experts, with scores of apparatuses, have been doing their best to keep track of him. He also knows that soon, very soon, he will be taxiing up the deck alongside that same island. And that from up in it somewhere a talker-spotter, after giving the plane's number, also will give the word "in."

A sweet word is that short word "in." For all its brevity, it can be sweeter than the longest word there is.

8

WE SPEAK of the sign-language in the Indian wars, and of how a scout could make quite a name for himself by indicating to a village of Piutes, for instance, that he was hungry. He might do this by first pointing to his open mouth and then to his stomach. Or if this didn't work he might indicate it further by snatching up a shank of venison and beginning to gnaw on it.

There is no chance for us aboard, of course, to compete with such ingenuity. The Americans of today are not what they used to be. For one thing the written word, so it is said, has spoiled

us by making intercommunication too easy. There is a great truth to all that, and certainly one which should not be denied. But though most of us aboard have lost out on being witnesses to such miraculous sign-talk as that of a clever frontiersman indicating the sun by pointing at the sun, nevertheless our own flight deck, as regards the sign-language, is at least a sort of runner-up.

When the propellers and motors of some eighty planes are all roaring at the same time within the limited space of a comparatively few square yards, the only possible method by which mechanics can be made to understand pilots, and pilots to understand the signalmen, and the signalmen to understand the orders from the bridge, and the bridge to understand the whole general outlay on the flight deck—the only possible way to communicate is by being visual about it.

It is no secret, even to the enemy, that a highly geared plane can become obstinate at the damndest times. That same plane may have been behaving beautifully the previous time off the carrier, and may have continued behaving beautifully during the inspections aboard ship, and may have still continued behaving beautifully up to the moment the pilot is signalled to bring it up to the take-off spot. Then here it is that the plane may announce the hell with it all. It doesn't want to fly that day. It wants to stay aboard. Or if it is forced to fly it'll take off the flight deck all right, but that's all it will do.

As nobody aboard wants that to happen, it's then up to the humiliated pilot, after taking another look at the backward dials, to communicate the information to the signalling-off crew. The propeller may be spinning as furiously as any of the others, and from the sidelines the plane may appear perfectly fine. But there may be some little something, or some big something, which only the pilot, testing everything in the cockpit,

has discovered. For, during the roar of a wholesale take-off, all planes sound the same, and their thunder is blended.

During all this thunder the pilot, of course, has more than one way of conveying his message to the head signalman who already is whirling his little flag, meaning get going. That is, it must be granted that the pilot has more ways than through the sign-language. He could, for instance, write a letter about it, and have this letter delivered to the take-off crew. Or he could beseech all the other motors to stop while he gives the message orally. For reasons of his own, though, he doesn't do that.

Instead, the pilot's thumb most likely will point down, and will stay that way in plain sight until a mechanic or somebody leaps up to the wing alongside the cockpit. Then is when the pantomime really begins in earnest. And so for this reason, and for a hundred other reasons, there has come into being on this flight deck a vocabulary which, though emphatic enough, is also voiceless.

The pantomime may mean anything from poor gas pressure to a broken receiving set. Or it may mean anything else. Or if we see the pilot's head shaking negatively, and continuing to shake negatively, it may mean not merely "no." It may mean a whole lot of "no's" terminating with a sacrilegious stinger.

Nor is the pilot the only one doing the gesturing. He is aware of holding up the parade of planes trying to organize behind him, and the take-off crews likewise are aware of it. Delay being quite a crime on a well-organized flight deck, there then begins a wholesale display of pantomime by everybody. The culprit plane is signalled to be gotten out of the way somehow so that the others can move up—and off.

Pilots from their sunken perch, and surrounded as they are with contraptions, are not expected to have a good view of the

deck immediately beneath them and around them. The take-off crews, which can see underneath and behind and on all sides, have to be the guiding factor. The members distribute themselves a brief space along the deck, each member by hand-signals relaying the pilot on ahead to the next member who in turn, if all is well, relays the pilot on ahead to where the final signalman takes charge of the final "rev" and the final signal for the take-off.

If all of this sounds complicated, it is exactly as it should sound. For only by hand-signals, such as a clenched hand pointing at one wing (meaning: hold that wing where it is), and a wave-on hand toward the other wing (meaning: bring it on, circle it), can a pilot be guided to where his plane is to go.

A further description of the signals might become tedious unless one expects to make his profession out of them. But what doesn't become tedious, at least when we are looking on from up in the island, is when signals become combined with what certainly could be mistaken for telepathy.

This occurs when a plane captain, or a mechanic, or some helper who happens to be nearest the plane at the time, is beckoned up alongside the cockpit by the pilot. The wordless conversation will take place as usual behind the whirling propeller. So much so that the youngster, leaning over with his feet on the wing, personifies a piece of tableau which could be called Autumn Tempest. He cannot conveniently ungrip his hands from the cockpit to talk back with them or he would be blown away.

But the youngster, after getting the sign-language from the pilot, suddenly will nod his head, dismount, hurry across the flight deck, then disappear. It is useless for the rest of us even to try to guess what he went after. Something the pilot forgot, maybe. Or something the pilot suddenly decided he needed. For when the youngster quickly reappears he may be bringing

anything from the pilot's good-luck talisman to a tube of sun-burn grease.

How all this is done is not for us to answer here, even if we could. The old frontiersman would know, of course. "Grease? That's easy," we can hear him say to himself. He would point to a bear, no doubt, and then back to his own face. But he would have all day to do it in, to give it the stuff, to make it really good, whereas today's young Americans aboard, being amateurs, needs must limit themselves to seconds of time.

9

IF A readyroom could be defined precisely, then a readyroom no longer would be what it is. For a readyroom is like a good many other rooms in several respects; meaning a lot depends on who happens to be in it at the time.

The readyroom has been pictured in many ways. It has been pictured as a grim place in which the flyers, while waiting for their final orders, sit in their high-backed seats sternly and tensely, almost as if the remaining minutes of their lives were being ticked off by the ship's clock.

Again, the readyroom has been pictured as a free-for-all rumpus room. In it the flyers everlastingly are playing crude jokes on one another, are throwing each other's clothes around, and are behaving in general as if the end of the war had been announced.

Or again, the readyroom has been pictured as a sort of sitting-up dormitory in which the flyers, weary from their work, barely have managed to reach the seats before falling dead asleep, and staying that way.

For some reason, too, "the" readyroom usually is mentioned in the singular. But aboard our carrier each squadron has its own readyroom, and there are three squadrons aboard: the torpedo-bombing squadron, the dive-bombing squadron, and the fighting squadron.

Nor are these three readyrooms the only ones aboard. The flight gunners, enlisted men, have their own readyrooms as well. The readyrooms of the gunners are alongside the readyrooms of their corresponding pilots. A short passageway connects the two. Because the pilots of the fighting squadron go up in their planes alone, and have no gunners, and therefore no readyroom for gunners, the number of readyrooms aboard this carrier totals five.

For convenience it would be nice to think that all these readyrooms are the same, and that when we have learned to know one readyroom we have learned to know them all.

Well, in a sense the readyrooms for the pilots are the same in general physical outlay. The seats are the same throwback long seats with the same headrests and the same leathery upholstery and the same connecting doo-dabs for keeping one's papers and for writing. The little motion picture type screen in front, or off to a corner, is much the same in each readyroom, too. So are the shelves for magazines. For that matter, so are the magazines. At least the magazines have the one feature in common of all being pretty old.

But the fascination of a readyroom is this: it is something which can become anything at any time.

At a hand gesture by the squadron commander or by the squadron's intelligence officer, the readyroom can be transformed from a free-for-all bullfest into a sort of classroom. Yet this comparison of a readyroom to a classroom, as we remember

classrooms, is not quite accurate. In fact, the comparison could tend to throw the picture all out of focus again.

To be sure, more truths about flying and about operations have been delivered in a readyroom than have ever been given in a textbook to-date. Nevertheless the attitude of a readyroom never can be quite that of a classroom.

During those evenings when serious talks are being made, and especially just before a take-off mission, the pilots listen, all right. God, how they listen. But what differentiates their listening from ordinary classroom listening is that the pilots are *thinking* as well. And *thinking* very hard.

For what they are about to do, as of daybreak tomorrow we will say, is not what others are about to do. It's what they themselves are being assigned to do individually and as a unit. Also, as the pilots obviously want to come out of it if they can, and at the same time complete each item of the job, it's natural that they should become a lecturer's dream as an audience. If any tricks are left which they should know about, now's the time—or never.

Yet none of even this adds up in a readyroom to a grim quietness or a grim hush-hush. At least not for very long. As surely as they are sitting in the readyroom at all, somebody there is bound to make some unexpected remark. He may not mean it as a funny remark, but it will turn out to be one anyway. So other cracks will follow the first one. Quite a few by now will be taking their hand at it. And housekeeping, for the time being at least, will be broken up.

Or sometimes it can be broken up by somebody outside the readyroom, as was the case prior to one of our raids. During the final briefing of the pilots this conscientious person had a messenger deliver to the readyroom for reading a government mimeographed bulletin about income taxes. And along with the

bulletin the conscientious person had sent his own serious reminder that tonight would be a good time to pay them.

Nor is it any idle chatter, either, that a readyroom often serves as an unofficial clearing house for gripes or suggestions among the pilots. All the members of a squadron are in the readyroom during a briefing. They are right there. And it is not as if they were arguing about something while in the limited groups of their stateroom gab sessions.

They are all right *there* in the readyroom. So, if anybody *there* has an idea that it might be better, or might have been better, if Pete had done this or that, or in the future would do this or that, instead of that or this,—then Pete can hear about it from all sides. Also he has his own chance to put in his own two pennies' worth at the same time, and to *everybody*. Obviously all of this helps towards that greatest gift a squadron can have, the gift of unity.

From its very name, readyroom, one naturally would assume that it is primarily the place for the flyers to await the order: PILOTS MAN YOUR PLANES. The readyroom at first may have been intended for that purpose alone, and certainly all its original features have been retained. The flying apparel is still kept there. It may be hanging on hooks, or some of it may be hanging on the backs of the chairs. And it's from this room (or rather, these rooms) that the flyers most definitely do depart to man their planes. But—

The pilots' readyrooms, being air-conditioned, are also the coolest places aboard ship for lounging around in, for playing bridge in, for playing acey-deucey in, for telling dirty stories in, for mending clothes in, and for discussing that ceaseless subject of what one's going-to-do-after-the-war in.

The discussion about this latter topic, incidentally, is one thing that can make us older members aboard feel *our* years.

We keep forgetting how young these pilots really are, especially when compared to our own ages. For these pilots not only look old, they talk old, and they also do work which we could not possibly do. It is almost as if at times we were the youth of the ship, and they the adults. But the catch comes when, to repeat, they start discussing in their readyroom what they plan to do for a career when the war is ended.

It is then that we elders aboard are brought up sharp by our own silent reminder to ourselves: "By God, between the other war and this one we've already had the chance at the kind of life these pilots are talking about having."

Maybe we have succeeded in having that kind of life, or maybe we haven't. But anyhow it's too late now. The reminder is neither unpleasant nor pleasant, exactly. It always does seem weird, though, and perhaps that's the word.

10

GENERAL QUARTERS is that time of day when nobody likes anybody, and when the world's funniest joke would flounder still-born in a cesspool of sourness.

This refers to the daily morning G.Q., the one which comes when the time is neither night nor daylight, and when the men are awakened throughout the carrier by sounds resembling ash-cans being hurled into the flywheel.

Somebody aboard ship must have a lot of fun just waiting for the minute hand to reach the precise moment an hour before sunrise when he can start the pandemonium, and can see us run.

Undoubtedly, too, he must feel gloriously smug about it all,

and likewise hypocritically virtuous. One who is wide awake in the morning always can feel virtuous awakening another.

Perhaps the ones who sound G.Q. have been granted the privilege as a reward for good behavior. Perhaps the skipper himself says: "All right, my boy, if you promise to be good all next week I'll put you on the list to sound G.Q. sometime."

All warships, no doubt, have their own pre-dawn G.Q.'s the same as ours, especially when in waters reachable by enemy submarines. Yet it is not likely that those aboard a smaller warship, unlike those aboard a giant carrier, have to leap such vast distances and over and through so many decks between bunk and battle station. It would be different if, in the clammy darkness, we were all going the same direction.

The paraphernalia we drag along with us does not tend to make the passageway-ladders any easier during the squeezes. If we have cause to believe that our immediate waters may be dangerous at dawn (and any water in the mid-Pacific is not what could be called Lake Huron), then the equipment we drag with us is likely to be whatever our sleep-glazed eyes have happened to see first.

The equipment most likely will consist of a tin helmet which we hope is our own, and a life jacket or a life belt which, in the rush, we feel fairly confident isn't. But there's neither the light nor the time to look for stamped names now. The watertight hatches, in another moment, will go down with a chain-like finality.

Watertight compartments will be banged tight too. Indeed, once the minutes are up, time or hatch-cover wait for no man. Yet it does remain quite important, at least for one's conduct sheet, that he does report to his battle station before, let us say, the battle is over.

Of all the hundreds of battle stations aboard this carrier, the

ones the hardest to reach but also the most worth while to reach are the ones up in the island. The passageways up into the island are remindful somewhat, especially during the hazy dimness of a G.Q., of one of those nightmares wherein one is constantly treading a treadmill upward, ever upward, but getting nowhere.

The zig-zag passageways up into the island can be mounted finally, of course, or else there would not be the need of the ladders at all. But the island has so many decks and bridges, and is banked below by so many turrets and gun nests, that one feels he is not being left out of things after he ultimately gets up there. He can see whatever occurs. The occurrence need not be in the classical manner of an enemy torpedo or in the even more classical manner of some 16-inchers coming one's way; still, something always is occurring aboard a carrier, anyhow, and he can see it from up there.

We would still rather be back in our bunks sleeping, and no doubt the enemy would like to have us back there sleeping. But war being war, and G.Q. being what it is, and the established order of "no smoking during G.Q." being an established order, the next best trick is to manage to be on that side of the island where one can watch the planes warming up below in the darkness.

That some of the planes will be taking off for the dawn patrol is not always certain. The dawn patrol for this particular morning may have been assigned to another carrier with the task force. But whichever way it is, it doesn't make much difference. Most of the planes will be warming up, anyway, preferably for a quick getaway in case—

The blue-reddish flames from the multitude of exhausts, all bursting and roaring at the same time in the blackness, is what gives the flight deck its Dante's Inferno complexion during

such times. They do not throw out much light but they do throw out terrible shadows under the wings and against the fuselages; fiery shadows which appear to be leaping and shrieking in a mad effort to get the hell away from there.

It is as if, too, the devil's own little henchmen were having a lot to do with the affair, as if they deliberately were stirring it up, as if they were wanting a real fight to occur between flame and flame, the winner being the one which can out roar the other.

So on a carrier this is the flight deck scene, perhaps, which one remembers most during the grizzly hour of a G.Q. The other scene, coming later, is when the other members of the task force gradually begin taking shape through the growing grayness.

But even this latter episode does not compare, at least in poesy, to what comes next. It will be the bos'n's own whistle, and it will be announcing: "All Hands. Secure from General Quarters."

And after that will come the best poesy of all: "Smoking Lamp Is Lit."

11

AFTER the body of the plane passes in review along the flight deck, then comes the little rear gunner. He is hardly seen. He sits there all curled up in the rear turret like an after-thought. Or as if he had just sneaked aboard for the fun of it, and didn't want the pilot to know he was there.

In the case of the torpedo-bombers, the rear gunner appears smaller still. He is riding under a dome-shaped blister then,

and could be a little museum figure under glass. His back will be to the pilot, two compartments ahead. In between is what is called the "greenhouse." It contains a lot of the radio equipment and stuff. The rear gunner, his back towards the direction the plane is going, seems forgotten.

In a sense he is forgotten. At least there is not the ado made over him there should be. This is not the fault of the pilot. He usually thinks a lot of his rear gunner, or else the pilot would get another one.

Whenever the pilot takes off the carrier, whether during darkness or day, the rear gunner takes off too. He goes bouncing along on the flight deck as if he really liked the work. Some like it. Some don't. But they go through with it anyway.

They fly the same number of hours as the pilot, and they make the same carrier landings, and the same carrier take-offs. Should ever the plane go plooo-oomp into the sea, with no chance to bail out, the rear gunner goes right with it. The rear gunners, enlisted men, rate their own ode in this carrier-war, and would to God they could get it.

It is not as if rear gunners were mechanical youngsters with no imagination. Their imagination is unbounded at times. They know the score.

Like everybody else aboard this carrier, the rear gunners come from every state, and from all those tiny inland towns which only their own people ever have heard mentioned. It's a big day for such rear gunners, for instance, should ever the county papers mention their names. It's a big day and a nice one. Otherwise, while flying month after month out here at sea, they do seem forgotten.

The pilots do better, though perhaps not much better. But the words "carrier pilot" carry with them their own description and their own class; whereas the words "rear gunner" may

mean a rear gunner working anywhere, and not over the ocean week after week necessarily, and not doing these carrier landings and take-offs.

Formerly aboard this carrier many of the planes bore individual names painted on the hoods, such names as "Flying Jenny," "Captain Blood," "Celia," "Juliana," "Rosie the Riveter," and so on, the same as one would imagine such names to be. But as with all things in life, there came a time when the painted names were being overdone. In fact, there came a time when the names on the hoods were being accompanied by illustrations as well, and when the illustrations were not always with clothing. So now there are no names on these carrier planes, and no illustrations either.

But those names, as long as they were allowed to last, did do something: they added a recognizable individuality to the planes as they passed in review to the take-off spot. It was much like the review of blanketed race-horses before the race. From the island we could say of the pilot something to the effect: "Hi, here comes Johnnie in the 'Naughty Lady.' Wonder how he's going to do today."

And huddled backwards in the turret would be the rear gunner who, because of the plane having a name, we could recognize almost equally well, despite his goggles and the rest of his flying fixtures.

But usually the little rear gunner, especially when in a torpedo-bomber, is fairly well concealed until the plane already has whirled along the deck for the final spring. Then we can see him curled up and facing us from within the tiny dome. Continuing to face us, with his back still to the pilot, he does not get to see his own take-off from the deck. From all appearances he may as well be reciting that old roulette phrase: "Here it goes. Where to, nobody knows."

During take-offs, or even during landings, the rear gunners of the dive-bombers do have a little the better of it in being able to express their individualities. They can face the pilot if they like. And also, until they pull the hoods over themselves, they are free to the air, and also freer to demonstrate what they are thinking.

One such rear gunner, for example, used to be recognized by what he always did just when his plane started down the stretch for the leap. Invariably he would spit on his right hand, then pat the hand ceremoniously three times against the plane's side. This would be his final gesture, and away the plane would go.

The rear gunners, and the pilots for that matter, are not backward about the talismans they take with them. Most of the rear gunners have little good-luck omens of some sort, and once the gunners get started showing them around during a gab fest, the whole affair can become more of a competition than an exhibition.

They admit being frightened, as indeed they have cause to be frightened. For their carrier planes, after all, are not very big. If anything should go wrong with such single-motored jobs, nobody can get up, move around, and start repairing it.

One rear gunner, after one of our raids when his plane got shot up some, told us how all the way back to the carrier there was only one thing he could do while sitting there hoping.

He had the picture of his girl with him (he showed us the picture) and he had put it in the turret where he could keep his eyes on it.

"No, I don't like her especially well," he said. "In fact she's pulled some tricks on me that I don't like at all. So I just put her there and thought about those tricks, and it kept me from thinking of other things too hard."

12

BEFORE a carrier of our size leaves port, the first cargo to be taken aboard is scuttlebutt, tons and tons of it, sling-load after sling-load of it.

An invisible chief of some invisible supply department must have something to do with the arrangement. He must say: "Never mind the fuel till afterwards. Or the extra ammunition. Never mind the commissary stores, either. They can wait. But do make sure that each stateroom is packed with nice fresh guesses, and make sure that none of the guesses are the same."

With all its hidden decks in which to nurture rumors, life on a vessel as huge as this can become a good deal like some mammoth game wherein each contestant submits an opinion, and then is honor-bound to defend that opinion against all-comers.

Logic is not necessary in the rules. Nor is proof. Nor is truth. The one essential, though, is that each contestant aboard retain the squinty-eyed attitude of: "Well, I'm not asking you to believe me. I'm just TELLING you, is all. And don't ask me how I learned, either."

Prior to sailing from port, we most definitely are going back to the States for drydocking at Seattle. We most definitely are going to be part of a task force to raid Burma. We most definitely are going into the Atlantic and then on to the Mediterranean.

We are going to Tasmania to replace a British carrier there. We are going out for night flying practice just to stay a couple of days.

But here's what we're really going to do, and it's the straight dope if you want to know: we're only going to move to the

other side of the bay to get some repairs done to our elevators. But if you really want to know where we ARE going, if you ree-eely WANT to know, well, you've all heard that Russia has opened up Vladivostok to us, haven't you, or maybe you don't know it yet but you WILL know it, but anyhow—

Anyhow we find ourselves out at sea as usual. And as usual, too, it will not be until the first or second morning out that the soothsayer's cards begin dropping into their respective places to point to an ultimate answer.

At first, after leaving port, there will be only our carrier with her few escorting destroyers. On the whole Pacific during that first day or two, there seemingly will be nothing else. The radio is silent, the sea is silent, and there is only the horizon which, after all, isn't so much with nothing on it.

Our planes have been flown aboard from whatever field they had been using while the carrier was in port. So now, added to our own array of scuttlebutt, we also have the additional array brought to us by the flyers. They have been in the throes of creation, too, the same as we have been.

So when we turn into our bunks that night from off watch, God alone seems to hold the slip with the right answer, and He apparently cannot be bribed or brow-beaten. It's easier for some of us just to give up, go to sleep, and leave our destiny with Him, especially since He's got a good old strangle hold on it anyway.

There comes a certain daybreak though, perhaps on the second or third morning, when the horizon no longer is the same horizon. Shadows are out there in the dimness, and they are moving at our same speed. So now we know we are a task force. This much at least we know.

"See, I told you so," says the chief boatswain.

"See, I told you so," says the ordnance officer.

"See, I told you so," says the signal lieutenant.

". . . and after this you'll listen to me, won't you?" says the master-at-arms.

But with daylight now, our signal flags and our blinkers become very busy sending and receiving, receiving and sending, sending and receiving. And with sunrise we begin to recognize, or at least begin to try to recognize, the various ships zig-zagging along with us.

"Sure, that's the old ——," somebody will say. "I ought to know. I served in her once."

"You're crazy. She has a bigger turret forward than that."

"You're crazy yourself. The turret's been changed, that's all."

And so it goes, until within an hour or so we do have the names fairly well established. We are introduced, so to speak, to the travelling companions who from now on out will be sharing this same sea with us. Yet it still doesn't answer where we're going or what we're supposed to do when we get there.

Scuttlebutt, ah, scuttlebutt. It neither has to be weighed in over the gangway nor checked out. It just goes along, the unseen cargo and the bulkiest.

13

THE whereabouts of the next coming raid is learned aboard this carrier in more than one way. The official way is one of these ways, and also the most theatrical, but it usually occurs after everybody aboard has a pretty good idea, anyhow.

The official way, though, is not without its melodrama, and so should not be entirely ignored even if it is an anticlimax.

The official announcement occurs perhaps on the afternoon of the third day out.

The delay is not deliberately designed to keep us in suspense. Rather, in a task force of any size the possibility remains that some vessel may have to turn back for engine trouble or for any one of a lot of reasons. In which case it obviously would not be wise to have the destination of the rest of us nosed around the beach too much or too soon.

On the afternoon of the third day out (we'll call it the afternoon of the third day out) the customary afternoon's announcement is given over the loud-speakers that all officers not on watch are expected to attend the equally customary afternoon's class in the wardroom. Ordinarily these classes are "on recognition." Yet so strong are the powers of scuttlebutt that we know already what is coming up. It's not going to be the customary class "on recognition" at all.

But even though we may know what the announcement is going to be, or even though we think we know, we always like to be in on the show. This is partly to have our own opinions verified somberly and officially, and partly because of the lighting effects.

The afternoon "class," to put it conservatively, is attended much better than usual. The chairs around the wardroom tables become so filled that some of us find ourselves standing up around the edges. We smoke a little, but we do not talk much, and all the performance lacks is a curtain. •

The wardroom will be darkened while charts, maps and photograph-slides of our objective are thrown on the small screen. We will be told by a judicial voice not only where we are going but also the hour of the day we are going to get there, and also the exact minute when the first take-offs will be made—if all goes right.

The phrase, "if all goes right," can cover many things. But mainly, as we are led to suppose and would suppose anyhow, the phrase has to do with the possibility of enemy interception before we get there.

After the main announcement is made, we will be told how no friendly islands are anywhere around the place we're headed for "and so if any of you find yourselves on a raft and are looking for a place to drift to, well, don't look for the currents to take you to any friendly islands because the currents where we're going don't go towards friendly islands. And besides . . ."

And then the ship's doctor gives his customary little talk, with his usual advice about how you should all take a clean bath on the evening before the attack and you should all get into the cleanest underwear you have and you must all report as soon as possible for another tetanus booster shot and you should see to it that you haven't misplaced those medical kits we had made for you aboard as besides they have morphine in them you know and you officers who were assigned them are responsible for them and so you have to know how to administer the shots to any of the men who are hurt around you we can't just assign this morphine freely you know ahead of time to all hands so you officers who have checked out with these little medical kits are responsible for them as I said and they're made so you can wear them on your belts and so now I'll show you again what's inside them. . . .

That's all there is to the announcements, and there's nothing in it that we aren't pretty sure of already. For by now the whole crew down to the number fiftieth messboy knows where we're going. With that genius which has never been explained by arithmetic or philosophy, all the crew by this time knows not only where all of us are going but also exactly how long it will take us to get there.

This fact was re-verified by one of the little anti-aircraft gunners in a gun nest aft of the island, more than half-a-day ahead of the time the big announcement was given in the ward-room. It was re-verified, to be exact, during that dismal era of G.Q. in the morning.

Some of us that morning were standing at our battle station near the gun nest when we overheard him and another gunner arguing. The argument didn't have anything to do with guns. It was just about something, anything, as it usually is. This was what the gunner said to the other:

"Lookit, you better not throw that at me—if you want to live out the rest of your five days and three hours."

14

WE ARE going to remember these nights when we sit around gabbing in the flyers' staterooms. We are going to remember them perhaps above a lot of other things which pass as adventure. But the most common commodity of this war on the Pacific has been, as we know, a series of almost unbelievable adventures. If they are not occurring one place on the Pacific they already have occurred there, and now are occurring somewhere else.

The cycle keeps whirling, and this has been the way of it ever since Pearl Harbor, ever since Singapore, ever since Bataan, ever since Midway, ever since Guadalcanal. The list can continue, and along with it thousands and thousands of inter-lapping adventures which fall into no name pattern whatsoever.

Adventures are so easy to have these days, and so numerous to hear about, and so accessible in books, magazines and news-

papers that for a fact there comes a time when one wonders how these adventures can avoid duplicating one another even more than they do.

It would seem as if the saturation point for variety already has been reached, and long ago, and that the topic of death and near-death has become so matter-of-fact actually that no longer is there news value in it even for those aboard here who should be most concerned.

This may be one of the reasons, then, why our nightly gab fests in the flyers' staterooms stand out so memorably as a sort of contrast. The word "contrast" is used advisedly, and yet there must be something to it. Otherwise there seems no explanation why we allow ourselves to become so engulfed up to our ears in arguments which don't concern war at all.

We will argue about trout fishing, and about farming, and about ancient authors, and about rivers, dogs, lobsters, trees, schools, religions, vegetables, shoes, fountain pens, music, cities. Naturally the topics sooner or later will get around to women. But apparently they cannot be classified so much as an argumentative topic as a topic of memory.

The staterooms of the flyers are not different seemingly from any of the other staterooms aboard. That is, they contain the customary two or three or four bunks, and the same sort of desks, and the same sort of lighting fixtures, and more or less the same sort of arrangement of pictures.

Why then should the carrier seem so hollow when the flyers are not aboard? Even the carrier seems to ask this question of herself, and the question concerns those hours, or that day at sea, when the flyers as yet have not flown aboard for the cruise from their land base while the carrier was in port.

The statement, "You just wait till the flyers get aboard," has become quite a refrain. "Things will liven up then." Things do

liven up, all right. There is no doubt about that. Yet it is not the livening up so much, perhaps, as the feeling of having the old homestead all filled up again with the family.

A carrier is built for her flyers, and around her flyers, and when they are not aboard a carrier cannot help but seem half empty and spiritless, and all this despite the hundreds and hundreds of other people aboard all hard at work. "But you just wait. The flyers will be aboard tomorrow."

The unpredictability of a flyer's stateroom at any given moment is in direct proportion to its number of inhabitants. For at sea a carrier-based pilot, unlike a land-based pilot, has only one place to go after he has finished his day's work. He cannot barge off in a jeep to some nearby town for a couple of hours to look over the natives.

His carrier instead is all he has, and to her alone he must return or not at all. The carrier is his town, and his boarding house. And his stateroom is the one and only place where, after flying over the ocean most of the day, he can sit around in shorts and try to think about other things besides flying for a while.

Besides, his stateroom will remain all he has in this respect for quite some time to come. Not only his pictures are there, as previously mentioned, but also just about everything else he owns.

If one of the flyers in the stateroom happens to be pleasantly married, or even soberly engaged, his pictures most likely will have been selected accordingly. But opposite him in the same stateroom may be another young flyer whose taste in pictures is not so limited. He may still be so young that, as regards women, a good portion of his future remains ahead of him, and so do his hopes.

The walls of these joint staterooms must provide space for

the selections of all their occupants. The walls as a result are likely to be splattered not merely by variety but also at times by some rather astonishing variety.

The walls are so decorated that if some of the younger unattached flyers have to stay out at sea much longer, and beyond reach of the States, they would have cause to assume from their own pictures that a lady is something which everlastingly is seated on the floor with one knee upturned. They would have cause to assume, too, that if ever a lady moves from one place to another she must move along the floor on coaster-wheels.

But the point of all this, if a point must be made out of it, is that a flyer's stateroom not only is his castle but also the castle of any of the other flyers who want to drop in.

By the end of a day's flying some of the pilots, as could be expected, are just naturally too all-in to do anything but sleep, especially when they also are billed for the morning's first hop. This means they must be up and ready and in their planes well ahead of official daylight. Yet there is an invisible power aboard this carrier which can guide the opposite-minded flyers into that stateroom where a session happens to be going on. And to here they come, and in here they crowd, and in here they sit around on the bunks wearing whatever brevity of clothing the temperature calls for in comfort.

In regard to conversation, as suggested by the younger pilots' pictures probably, some will like one thing while others will like that same thing too, of course. But beyond that, their topics and arguments will branch off until they completely box the compass.

In brief, they will talk about any topic except flying, unless by chance some flying incident of the day happens to appeal to all of them as worth while for entertainment.

Yet on after-thought the previous statement hardly is accurate. For flying remains in their minds so heavily, so consistently, and in such a concentrated package, that it is there in the stateroom whether they mention it or not. It pervades the room, it hangs from the lights, it sticks in the corners, it stands up in the middle of the deck, it sits on the writing-pads. It is there, all right. It is there all the time.

15

GRANTING that a flight deck is an island completely surrounded by anti-aircraft guns, so too are these guns completely surrounded by youngsters whose main wish at sea is that enemy craft may try to come through.

But aside from all that, these gunners comprise their own shirtless tribe, and their conversations during watch hours usually are conducted in such low growling monotones that anybody who didn't know the true worth of these youngsters might think for sure that they were about to draw lots for a slight case of cannibalism.

There seems to be an unwritten law among these gunners that to say a pleasant word to their fellow crew members is the lowest form of discourtesy.

The gunners also see to it, in their own talented way, that even their own crew captain never for a moment forgets that they allow him to live among them, not out of kindness exactly, but because of his convenience as something on which to practice new tribal tortures.

Yet, as previously suggested somewhere perhaps, the best time to overhear a gun crew at the height of its sour remarks,

one to the other, is during that wretched hour of the pre-dawn G.Q. And it is still better to single out an individual gun nest, preferably one with the 40-millimeters.

For these young gunners know right well that they are *good*, and that they can pop down just about any target sent aloft for them to pop down. Partly for this reason they have come to fear neither the gun captain nor the Holy Ghost. And it was with the sarcasm of unison, one hideously dark morning, that the crew was known to greet its captain with song. For the first time in his life he was a few seconds late arriving, and they greeted him with:

*Good morning, dear Martin,
Good morning to you—*

The tune was rendered with such sweetness and light that even the gunners themselves seemed somewhat aghast over the surprising discovery that such vocal cords of tenderness were part of the equipment of the human body.

Because their vocabulary as a rule has for its base root one word, some future doctor of languages can use this same crew of gunners as a laboratory study on how this one word, if properly intoned, can become the one and only word henceforth needed in oral communication.

The doctor of languages further can prove how, because of this one word, dictionaries no longer are necessary, and how books on grammar construction have been all these years but a waste of time in high school and university.

The word, when skilfully used, is also a time-saver by being self-sufficient in itself as adverb, verb, pronoun, noun, preposition, adjective, and likewise its own exclamation mark. This particular gun crew can, of course, stretch the word's gram-

matical usages even beyond that. But, then, they are experts.

This crew can make of the word a question as well as an answer, and by smuggling a tiny "oh" in front of it they can still keep in the conversational running even if no further statement or reply comes to them for another hour. At least the word can be made to serve as evidence enough that they haven't given up or haven't admitted surrender.

After two or three days in port, an occasion which is becoming more and more rare for this carrier, the gunners when back aboard are always the ones who have had the most amazing experiences ashore. Though their shore-leave may have been limited to minutes, and at a base undergoing a woman famine, the gunners' greatest difficulty apparently was the difficulty of choosing without hurting too many feelings. When the gunners tell about the demands made of them by the world's most beautiful ladies, one's faith in manhood indeed seems restored to its proper place again.

But the examples of gunners' sarcasm one to another may not mean so much when repeated or printed. For the time element and the surroundings and the circumstances have much to do with the sting. For instance, it doesn't mean much to repeat what one of the tired gunners said after being suddenly summoned back to the gun nest by another G.Q. He hardly had gotten into his bunk when the second G.Q. occurred. But, dragging his tin helmet with him, he climbed into the nest.

"Ah," he sighed to the crew captain, "but it's good to be back to that old salt air again."

Nobody pays any attention to anyone else's remarks, of course, all of which tends to make their bite all the more pronounced. The remarks are played before an audience of deadpans, an audience which wouldn't give anybody the benefit of a laugh even if he pulled off one of his arms and began eating it.

There was the time, too, when one of the gunners, on overhearing for sure where our coming attack was going to be, looked up from the paper-backed novel he was reading and announced to the same dead-pan audience: "Comrades-in-arms, we're going to make history. Comrades-in-arms, awaken to the clarion call."

The gunner must have just been reading the lines, but the crew captain growled: "Get the hell down off that perch and begin picking up this empty brass"—meaning the empty shells from target practice. Yet, come to think of it, this wasn't at all like the response given Patrick Henry for much the same thing.

When target practice actually is underway, though, these same dead-panners become demons of fanaticism. It is as if each load were being discharged deliberately at some guy they didn't like.

The target may be one of the aerographer's balloons sailing away at an unbelievable rate. Or again, the target may be a sleeve being towed by a plane. But anyhow, when the balloon is exploded, or when the sleeve is knocked out of the sky on the first round, the gunners don't act surprised or even overly happy. They merely growl a little, load up again, and wait for the next one.

When working around their guns between target practices, most of the gunners don't wear shirts if the weather is such that shirts can be avoided. As a result the turrets and the nests become another Louvre. That is, if the Louvre has an annex for tattooed art, and it should have one.

But what is strange about tattoos, despite their quantity, is their apparent sameness. It is as if the tattooers ran out of their last idea some fifty years ago. The shirtless gunners are a living example that we still have with us the skull with the snake, the tombstones, the Death before Dishonors, the To Mothers, the

pigs on the feet, the hearts with female names, the blood-dripping daggers.

And we still have with us also those two beautiful and apparently hungry bluebirds which are flying diagonally towards each other across the chest, and aiming for those two certain markers on the chest as if each marker were a grain of corn.

And we still have with us, and abundantly, that same customary rosy-tinted and full-bodied lady. And she still stands there as bewildered seemingly as ever she was at the wisp of bandage-gauze which a gust of wind so amazingly has just delivered across her lower stomach.

So it's true, tattoos haven't changed. Nor, for that matter, have American gunners.

16

THE job aboard a carrier which appears to be the most fun (from a distance and in photographs) is that of the landing signal officer. He is the one so often pictured standing aft by the fantail, colored paddles in each hand, and waving them as if the air were rent with hornets.

His base of operations is a small grilled platform which swings off the flight deck, and his backdrop is a screen of canvas. He doesn't stand in front of this backdrop when he is signalling, nor for that matter does he stand on the grilled platform. But they are his base of operations nevertheless, and the screen of canvas also serves as a windbreak.

There is a slight trace of the bullfighter in a landing signal officer. He not only has to know how to lure 'em on with his

colors, but he also has to know how to jump should things get too hot.

He himself is a carrier-trained pilot. Why he was selected from regular daily flying duty to be a landing signal officer is something he most likely will avoid answering outright. It may be that he really doesn't know. Or it may be that the powers-that-be told him they saw in him exactly all the stuff that a landing signal officer should have. And other than that, he had no say in the matter. This is the most likely.

Planes cannot simply race in and land aboard a carrier without guiding help. They could try it, of course, and supposedly there would be some which would succeed. But on approaching the flight deck for a landing, the pilot encounters a most definite blind spot. He cannot see his own wheels at any time, of course, nor can he see the immediate spot directly beneath him and directly in front of him where his wheels should first touch. The landing signal officer has to be the other pair of eyes.

That is one reason.

Another reason is that, with the planes of three squadrons circling the carrier ever lower and lower for their landings, somebody has to be at a conspicuous spot to direct the timing between planes, and to see to it that the flight deck doesn't become one beautiful mess of tangled-up propellers.

It must be remembered that a flight deck, though massive both in appearance and in actuality, is nevertheless limited in space where the planes must make their landings. This space aft with its arresting gear and barriers is less than half the deck's length. To over-shoot this space, and to try to make a landing anyway, would mean to crash into the planes already aboard and which have been brought forward beyond the barriers as fast as they can be brought.

The planes, on their approach "in the groove," come in at a speed of about seventy or eighty knots. At least this is the speed which is figured on if all is going well. Coupled with this, the ideal head-on wind for landing or launching planes is between thirty and forty knots. This does not mean that the wind itself has to be that strong literally. But the head-on speed of the carrier into the wind is making up for some of it.

So, when a landing signal officer is standing out there with his colored paddles, and a plane is approaching him for a landing, he has to keep a lot of things in mind besides just the plane itself. He has to keep the wind in mind, as mentioned, and he also has to keep in mind the condition of the flight deck on his side of the barriers.

But with his eyes concentrated on the incoming plane, and with the pilot of the plane concentrating in turn on the signal flags, it could all become quite a jumbled-up affair if the signal officer took time off to gaze at the condition of the deck behind him. He does, then, have his assistants, and one of them, an enlisted man, is the "talker."

The "talker," with earphones and a mouthpiece, squats just over the edge of the flight deck so that his eyes are level with it, and he keeps watching what is occurring to the plane which has just landed a few seconds previously.

If there is difficulty in getting the plane released from the landing-gear, or if there is difficulty in getting the plane taxied up forward beyond the barriers, the "talker's" conversation to the signal officer is all one-sided. It consists of the repetition: "Foul—foul—foul—foul—foul—" And then possibly a "clear."

Yet it is at such points as this that a signal officer has to make one of his many split-second decisions. He is as anxious as anybody in the ship to get all the planes aboard as soon as possible. He doesn't want to give the next incoming pilot the

good old "wave-off" any more than the incoming pilot wants to receive it.

But if, at that critical moment of timing between speed and distance, the "talker" is still saying "foul," then aloft go the signal officer's flags in criss-cross waving fashion. The pilot, in that same split second too, must push on more power to bank-turn over the deck and zoom away.

Though pilots are obliged to take a "wave-off" whether they like it or not, unless something devilish is the matter with their plane, they are not obliged to land even after the signal officer signals the "cut" to do so.

The signal "cut" means, of course, to cut the motor and let the wheels touch. The signal is indicated by a quick cross whip of the flags down low. It's then up to the pilot to do the rest. The signal officer is through with him, and now looks for the next incoming plane. The "cut" is the gesture finale with each plane, and with it the plane whirs on past the signal officer onto the deck for better or for worse.

There's a phrase which is used at times when a pilot, after getting the signal "cut," makes a bad landing through what appears to be his own fault. So dependent has he been on the flags of the signal officer during the past few seconds that now, when suddenly on his own, the phrase is: "He stopped flying."

Another job of the signal officer, as if his hands weren't filled enough, is to grade each landing much as a schoolteacher would do. This goes for the approaches as well. The moment the plane is aboard, and before the signal officer has time to forget the mental picture of the approach and of the landing, he quickly rattles off an abbreviated code of his own describing his opinion. An assistant scribbles the letters into a notebook after the pilot's name or after the number of the pilot's plane.

Afterwards, and usually when the pilots are in their ready-

rooms getting out of their togs, the signal officer from his notebook will tell them how they did, or what they didn't do, or what they should have done. All of which can be of help for the next time.

But the art of signalling planes aboard, and bringing them aboard rapidly with the maximum of safety, is such a complicated art that even when we watch from the island we do not catch the full picture. Or at least we do not catch it in the true perspective. The only place to catch the true perspective actually is right down there in the net next to the signal rack itself.

From the high island the perspective is such that what appears to be the making of a crack-up for sure may turn out in the end to be a very nice landing indeed.

From up in the island too, as in the grandstand of any football game, we are tempted each time to be the quarterback. Or in this case, the signal officer. Why doesn't he give the "wave-off"? Or: Why doesn't he give the "cut"? Or: Why did he give the "wave-off"? It looked all right to me.

Yes, we cannot resist being unofficial signal officers, none of us. All of which adds to the life aboard a carrier, too.

There's the story which goes how some new captain on one of the smaller carriers had much the same idea about quarterbacking from high up on his distant bridge.

Through the loud-speaker the new captain harassed the signal officer so much during the landings, and began yelling to him so much what to do each time, that the signal officer suddenly had to decide between smashing up the planes or his own Navy career.

He was so blindly furious about all the dictation during the height of a landing that, using an artist's prerogative (and he certainly was an artist), he tossed his signal paddles onto the deck and went below.

He aimed for the empty wardroom, and stayed there drinking coffee, trying to drown with it what he was thinking. Meanwhile, the remainder of the planes continued circling and circling the ship waiting for the signals, the pilots wondering what the hell.

Perhaps the end of the story might have been different if competent landing signal officers were something which could just be picked up for the asking. But months of training, and even years of training, have gone into what they do which may appear so easy. And in addition to their training they also have to have that little "something else" besides to be classed in the limited group of the truly top-notchers. Their fame, though not known to the public, is certainly known from carrier to carrier in this Pacific.

A top-notcher, though he may classify himself as "just another of those plane-bouncers," is really a gifted personage. It is taken for granted that he can signal the planes on in "along the groove," that with his paddles he can talk with the pilots continually, that he can tell them they are too low or too high or at too much of an angle or too fast or too slow. It is taken for granted, also, that he is responsible for making sure their wheels and their flaps are down before they come in. All this part of his ordinary work is understood.

But a true top-notcher is one who can go beyond any of this. He is the one who knows the personal characteristics of the individual flyers aboard. Some of these flyers, he realizes, are better at one type of approach than another, and some are just naturally so good at carrier-landings that he need not worry too much about them, but can concentrate on the others instead.

If there is to be uniformity in the landings, naturally, it is well for him to see to it that all the flyers behave more or less

the same way. But in those cases of emergency, in those cases where planes have to be brought aboard regardless, and brought aboard fast—these are the moments when the artistry of a signal officer really shows, and really pays dividends.

He knows in a second what allowances to make for one flyer, and what not to allow for another. Some can get by, and skillfully, with something which might cause others to hit the deck too hard. He will recognize the pilot by the number of his plane, or he may recognize the pilot himself as he circles by. And when a plane has signalled the instant need of an emergency landing regardless of anybody or anything, but preferably a landing on deck, all this depends too on the signal officer's ability. Or when they come in with their big bomb loads still stuck to the plane and unreleasable. Or when they come in with their landing-gear shot away. Or when they come in wounded and barely able to make it. These are the moments when a true top-notch, working his most delicate best with the pilot, is surely an artist supreme.

Anyhow, to return to that story which was started some while back, it was not long before that new captain on the little carrier began imitating the pilots aloft by also wondering what the hell.

There was no other landing signal officer aboard, so now you know how the story ends. He was summoned from his coffee back up to the flight deck. Nobody coached him over the loud-speaker after that. Nor, according to our version of the story as told to us, did anybody mention court-martial.

For a landing signal officer is at his best when, along with knowing the rest of his trade, he has the absolute confidence of his flyers—and this one had it. They stuck by him the same as he in turn that day had stuck by them by not heeding distant advice. If the confidence in a landing signal officer ever has

cause to become the least bit wobbly, a pilot consciously or subconsciously may hesitate about the signals at a critically wrong time.

So all in all a landing signal officer, in his yellow sweater and yellow cloth helmet, may look gaudy out there next the fantail, and he may look funny waving those colored paddles around his head. But above him there may be as many as sixty pilots and their gunners who would like very much to be able to eat that night. He wants to see to it that they are able.

17

ON THE final Sunday before D-day, when the coming of D-day itself could be measured now by hours, the church services were attended as rapidly as they could be organized here and there over the carrier.

The phrase "here and there" is not in this case a bromide.

The work throughout this great ship automatically gains momentum as the big hour approaches for the first take-offs to do battle.

Besides, Sunday happened also to be refuelling day for the escorting destroyers. One by one our share of these destroyers came alongside, the fuel hoses were swung to them, the smoking lamp was doused, and the pumping began, with both vessels continuing underway the while.

As usual extra working crews were required to man the hoses, the hoses in turn took space on the hangar deck, and the hangar deck was filled with planes undergoing their final testing. This is why during such hours before a D-day there is not much

room for the services. Nor much room for quietness. And it is why, too, so many services usually are held throughout the day. Men on working details or on watches during one service may catch another one later. The same holds true with the flyers out on patrol.

This carrier has a Protestant chaplain and a Catholic chaplain, and their respective services are conducted accordingly. Also, there are Jewish services. But during any of these services the ocean slides by quite the same as ever it did, the gun watches stay by their guns, the gigantic elevators continue lifting planes up and down from the flight deck, and we continue lessening the distance between our bow and the land of the enemy.

About the only thing different this time, as the destroyers pulled up alongside to be refuelled, was the absence of music from our own ship's band. Usually during a refuelling the band gives out with a few numbers for the benefit of the destroyer crew.

The band will station itself as close as possible to the destroyer, and the destroyer will be asked by megaphone or by semaphore or even by a blackboard what the crew over there wishes to hear played. It is not likely, though, that the destroyer people can hear the music very well. We can hardly hear it ourselves. For when two vessels are swishing along close together this way they create their own swells which break against each other's hulls. The result is a continual swishing roar much like the sound of breakers, only steadier.

Though the band was there this time as usual, it did not play. This was because of the church services going on elsewhere. But the men on the destroyer didn't seem to mind too much. They could see that the band was there, ready and willing, and this seemed to be about all that mattered. Besides, the

men on the destroyer were pretty busy themselves. Those bulky fuel hoses are hard to handle.

The hoses wiggle and writhe with the wind and the sea and are remindful of a pair of amazingly sized pythons. As if straining to release the lines holding them to captivity the black hoses, glistening with sea water, dip and plunge and twist.

But even though the seas ground against the hulls, we did have our *own* music aboard the carrier—and it did not come from the band. The music came from a small portable organ on the opposite side of the hangar deck. The organ was smothered from sight by surrounding fuselages.

The organ had been brought from somewhere to there, and on its keys a sailor in dungarees was playing *Rock of Ages*. The small audience, seated on benches, was in dungarees also the same as the player. A few officers, just coming off watch, joined the group. They were in their working khaki. No neckties. No jackets. Next to the organ was a tiny table covered with a tablecloth.

The tablecloth could not possibly have been so white as it appeared to be. But compared to the greased-up motors all around, and compared to the outstretched fuel hoses, the whiteness of the tablecloth seemed to be as radiant as it was white. It shone there as the focus-point, and on it was a tiny plate of wafers for communion.

Meanwhile, all around the hangar deck, work continued on the machinery. Men with monkey-wrenches were working under the upturned cowlings, others were working in the cockpits, others were sprawled down on the deck working with the landing gears. Propellers were being tested and spun, re-tested, then spun again. Yet the organ for some reason could be heard. It could not be heard loudly. Nor could it be heard above the other sounds. It could be heard *through* them.

The hangar deck side doors were open on each side. Those on the starboard were open to the destroyer being refuelled out there. The doors on the port were open to the same old sea sliding by, and when the chaplain moved to his miniature pulpit to take over the meeting he was standing silhouetted against this sliding sea. As a backdrop it was gray and it was green and it was blue and it was lavender, and it was never without motion.

What the chaplain said to the packed little group could not be heard beyond the limits of the group. But when the small organ began again, and when the men sang the next hymn, the organ could be heard the same as before.

After a while four or five of the group at a time arose from the benches and filed by the little white table to receive the things off it. This meant that the meeting was nearing its close. But soon, very soon, there would be another one. It would be held somewhere, wherever there was room.

18

A CHANGE came in the flyers' staterooms. The change was not meant to be there, but it was there. Perhaps if one had not been with these flyers through all the previous weeks and previous months the change would not have been noticeable. He would think: "Ah, D-day's going to be like any other day with them. Isn't that fine?"

Their own daily routine continued much as usual. So the change wasn't in the routine. They carried out their patrols and their tactical practices. During those one or two hours of an afternoon, if the flight deck happened to be cleared enough for

it, they also got in their workouts playing volleyball, each squadron having a turn at it whenever possible. So the change wasn't noticeable in any of this, either.

For if the afternoon happens to be one without much wind, the volleyball net is rigged on temporary stanchions on the forward flight deck. But if there is too much wind up there for a light volleyball, the forward elevator will be lowered to the hangar deck, making a perfect pit, and the net will be stretched across the elevator down there.

The heavier medicine ball, though, can be used on the flight deck regardless of wind. But to toss the medicine ball around, or even to slam it around, can in time become too boring. So it is used up there like a volleyball, and a couple of volleyball nets are rigged up for it also. But the flyers prefer the faster game, the real one down in the pit.

These flyers, being so young, still carry many of the earmarks of their college or university football and basketball while they whip the volleyball around. But being rusty from lack of constant practice they don't take any ground rules too seriously, but prefer to out-argue each other or make new rules as they go along. For, after all, their lives are conducted on an hour-to-hour arrangement, one which says: "Play when you can but don't count on it."

Besides, they are a long way from the old campus these days, and it will be up to them in a short while to try to blast up a place which few of them had ever heard of before. At least back in their home towns.

All games stop on the flight deck and in the hangar pit with the call from the bridge: "Prepare for landings!" Or: "Prepare to launch planes!" And then it's back to work again. The nets come down. The temporary stanchions come down. The bulky medicine balls are collected. So is the volleyball. These things

are collected quickly, and they vanish, and the forward elevator begins its low moaning whistle.

The whistle indicates that the elevator, almost a small deck in itself, is being brought up and to stand clear of it. The war has been resumed.

But during the night, now, in the staterooms the coming event begins to show itself among the flyers, especially among the newer replacements aboard, for whom this will be their first combat.

The flyers in their shorts sit around telling jokes as usual, and talking about women as usual, and arguing about far-off things as usual. But periodically there comes a hush. It is sort of a group hush. And the next one to speak may fringe ever so slightly onto the topic about which all of them are thinking.

The opening may start them off. For they do have questions to be asked of the veterans. And they know, too, by the simple law of combat mathematics, that some of them are not going to be aboard again after the thing is over.

"Say, what the hell does one do about his clothes? Does he have them mailed back home or what?"

"Not for me; I wouldn't have them mailed back home. Just leave them here and you bums use them."

"Damned if there's anything of yours that'll fit me. Well, maybe your blue underpants. How many of those you got?"

"But no kidding, what does a guy do about clothes and things like that? All these damn uniforms? A lot of money are in these things. Ach, shust veel dem goods. But what, for instance, would you want done with yours?"

"Have 'em auctioned off, by Jesus, and all you cowhands get drunk."

"But seriously—"

"Well, one thing I wouldn't have done with them is have

them sent home. Who the hell's going to wear them there? My wife?"

"There's where all you guys are crazy. Every damn one of you. Sure, have all the stuff sent back, and let them do there what they want to with them. How the hell do you know whether they want 'em or not? You don't know."

"Okay. Okay. But you don't have to make an oration about it. But say, now that we're on the subject, I got another idea." He indicates the decorations on the wall. "Look at all those naked pictures of Slim's. Well, who of us gets those?"

"I do."

"Like hell you do," Slim answers. "Them go to my mother."

By this time others will have entered the stateroom, and some will have left it to get some sleep. So the number will remain about the same.

"Well, I'll be damned if here isn't Louie the Kid. Say, Louie, glad you came in. We were just talking about you. Say, Louie, you still got that phonograph?"

"Yep. Why?"

"And you still got those records?"

"Most of them, I suppose. Why?"

"Well, it's this way, Louie. We'll be looking for another roommate after this thing's over. How'd you like to move in?"

"Which bunk can I have?"

"It'll be that upper one up there where Tommy's sitting."

Tommy: "Like hell it will. Not unless some of Louie's own fighters, the clumsy bums, shoot us down in the dark. Say, Louie, why don't you tell your guys that we're friends of theirs. That we're on their same side. They might not know it yet."

"The same for you, sweethearts. But what I came in for was to know if you had any writing paper? Got any? Mine seems to be all swiped."

"Sure, there's some right there in the desk. Help yourself. But not too much now. Write on both sides of it. Which reminds me, I got a letter or two to write myself."

"So have I."

"Yep, so have I. But listen, who aboard do you leave these things with? So you can get 'em back."

"Oh, just anybody. It doesn't make any difference."

"Will you take care of mine then, Slim?"

"Sure. Yes, for Christ's sake, I'll take care of yours. But you really ought to ask somebody out of a different squadron. Or somebody who'll likely be aboard."

Before midnight somebody else most likely will enter the stateroom either demanding food or else bringing some with him. If he brings it with him it most likely will consist of a couple of cans of sardines and some crackers. There is no definite telling what it will be, though, as the food the flyers cache in their staterooms depends on whatever kind of small canned stuff they were able to buy ashore.

"Now, don't everybody shout at once. Remember your manners. But where's the can-opener?"

"Damned if I know. Somebody took it out of this room a week ago. Bet it was you, Louie. But here's my knife."

19

OUR classes on enemy recognition can be conducted by the intelligence officers, and a lot of the classes are conducted that way. These classes are more of a game, though, than a boredom.

As a game they are serious to the extent that the topic is as

close to the personal heart of everybody aboard as a topic can become. Nobody aboard wants to shoot down an Allied plane merely because he has not seen the type before. Even more, perhaps, he doesn't want to let himself be shot by a plane merely because "from a distance it looked like one of ours."

Because the hands of the clock are not allowed to go around and around while one is making up his mind during the actuality, these classes on recognition are conducted with much the same speed. The flash of a plane's silhouette is shown on the screen, or shown from a card, and from this flash we record the plane's nationality and type.

The same idea holds in the recognition classes concerning warships, both enemy ones and friendly ones. A quick silhouette of her, or a quick picture of her, and what is she? And to whom does she belong? The individuals in the class keep their own scores, and when we make a bad score we are our own conscience. War and the responsibilities of our own surroundings out here are the reason.

But now, as we approach our objective, the classes have been extended to include a study of whatever information has been obtainable about the target itself. The intelligence officers were given ahead of time what information was obtainable from shore files, and this material was brought aboard for both the readyrooms and the wardroom. This material as usual includes photographs (some of them pretty old); intimate charts of the region, and also the latest dope (some of it pretty new) about the region.

Our carrier usually carries at least four intelligence officers; one for each squadron, and a fourth who serves more or less as a go-between. In civilian life they have been lawyers or businessmen or newspapermen mostly, but they are quite a long way from that now.

But the days when the intelligence officers aboard are really busy are those during an attack, and presumably that will be the way with it this time, too.

For the intelligence officer of each squadron is the one who interviews the flyers of his squadron after they return. He must try to get the stuff down fast and in intelligible shape before they go out again on another wave for the same place. This is to avoid wasting time or bombs or other ammunition on some spot of the target which already has been destroyed by the previous wave.

A squadron returning back aboard from the morning's first attack is never, of course, what could be called tranquil. The flyers buzz and chatter and talk and whoop around their ready-room as if they were building the Tower of Babel. Each wants to tell his own experiences to others who are too engrossed in telling their own to others who, in turn, are too engrossed in telling their own to others. This is where the intelligence officer takes a hand.

There is little use in the intelligence officer saying to the flyers of his squadron: "Now you be quiet, please." He may as well make the request of a bursting boiler. Rather, an intelligence officer most likely will use an ante-room for the interviews, and also a yeoman to take shorthand. One by one the flyers are summoned into the ante-room. "Now just what was it, Mike, you saw and did and hit, and where was it you got shot at the most?"

With a chart of the full target before him, the flyer then tells his part of the story as well as he can remember it. He even may indicate where the chart itself is wrong in places and needs changing. He indicates his own spots of action on the chart. He tells if and where he confronted any enemy vessels on the

way in or on the way back. He tells, also, if he saw it, where any of his flying mates were last seen going down.

After the first flyer's story is completed and tabulated the intelligence officer will use a barber's prerogative by calling "Next!" In this manner the whole picture of the first wave of the attack is pieced together as quickly as can be done under the circumstances. Meanwhile the planes of the squadron are being refuelled, and the flyers are grabbing coffee and sandwiches while getting ready for the next summons: PILOTS MAN YOUR PLANES.

In the same legendary manner that no two persons are reported ever to have seen the same accident in exactly the same way, so it goes with flyers after a raid. But by getting all their individual versions chronicled this way, and by the use of charts and photographs, a fairly good over-all picture results. And when everything is ready for the squadron to take off again on the next wave, the tactics are ordered accordingly.

D-day, then, will be as busy a one for the intelligence officers as for any of the rest of us. But their work, as already suggested, will neither begin nor end then. Several charts of the whole Pacific are kept on the walls of the main workroom of the intelligence officers aboard here. And all this is part of their work as well, keeping these charts up-to-date.

For these charts, much like headquarters' charts so often pictured in cartoons, are speckled with all kinds of colored pins. In this case the colored pins don't denote armies, naturally, but they do denote just about every bit of available information about what is going on in the Pacific.

These pins also designate the latest available information about the location of submarines, both friendly and enemy. These pins are the ones which seem to jump around quite a

good deal. Maybe they don't jump around the most, but they certainly are always jumping.

20

WHILE our carrier speeds ever westward, it would be odd to know what the sailors are writing home in answer to that most common of questions asked of them: "... and tell us, Johnnie, just what do you do aboard ship for amusement?"

The answers could vary so wildly, and still be technically correct, that no wonder the sailors may avoid the issue if possible and yet without wanting to seem morbid to the folks at home.

For no matter what the sailors might say they did for amusement, their statements would have to be qualified with an endless number of explanatory clauses.

The sailors, for instance, would have cause to hesitate before coming right out and saying: "Dear Ma: We skeet-shoot. Yours truly—"

Yet one of the gunnery training officers aboard not only has a skeet-shooting outfit with clay pigeons and the rest of it, but as often as feasible he sets up the outfit on the edge of the flight deck. Teams with shotguns take a whirl at it. The pigeons are sailed out over the ocean, scores are kept, and the whole scene could be just about anywhere else.

But explanatory clauses would have to be added to the letter, and added rather promptly. To begin, the shotguns available aboard for the affair are so limited that one shotgun usually serves for the whole works. The teams are chosen new almost each time. The gunnery training officer stands by to coach the

while, and it is all as much for training in firearms as for fun.

Also, on a carrier with a personnel the size of this one, it is doubtful if everyone aboard could get a turn at the shooting even if it were continued every day for a year—which it certainly isn't.

Sometimes the game is varied from clay pigeons to flying fish, with which, as the naturalists might word it, "this Pacific abounds."

But as another indication that skeet-shooting or flying fish-shooting must be classified aboard as something with considerable irregularity attached to it, we still have in mind what occurred on the evening after one of our most risky raids.

We were all occupied in getting out of those enemy waters before submarines could come when the gunnery training officer said: "Looks like a good time right now for setting up the skeet-shooter. Guess I'll go get permission from the bridge." So he left us.

And, in what could be measured by seconds, he returned.

"Well?" we asked. "What did the captain say?"

"He said 'no.' I mean that isn't what he said. He said: 'God damn it to hell NO!' That's what he said. So I guess I don't put up the skeet-shooter."

Another answer the sailors could give in their letters would be: "Dear Ma: In answer to your question, we take sunbaths. Yours truly—"

Yet this answer likewise would call for an equal number of qualifications, especially since sunbaths automatically bring to mind something pretty nice and lovely, with lushy hours of leisure to take them in.

A carrier is so constructed that men and officers on certain duties can live their weeks on her without ever being directly

under the sky. That is, unless they periodically make a deliberate point of getting under the sky.

With the flight deck covering the whole ship as it does, it can be like sailing constantly under a roof. If one's duties don't call for him to go topside on the flight deck, he can live his whole time aboard without ever really knowing what sort of weather is outside.

The portholes no longer are the same old portholes. They are not there to look through. If portholes exist at all in the main hull of this carrier they are sealed. Even an indication of where they might be in the main hull scarcely exists, and certainly they are not open in the staterooms. Once in awhile on rare days the portholes high in the island above the flight deck may be opened in the workrooms up there. But during G.Q. the portholes up there most definitely are secured shut again, and always throughout the night.

This does not mean that the carrier is stuffy. The electrical ventilating systems take care of that. But it does mean that the sky is a rarity except to those on the flight deck or on the open bridges of the island. And a goodly portion of the personnel aboard has nothing to do with the duties up there.

To try to grab off a piece of sunshine for oneself can be called, then, one of the amusements. The sailor in his answer would be right. And he would be doubly right if he were of the engine-room gang, or one of the clerks, or one of the yeomen, or one of the cooks, or one of the electricians, or one of the water-tenders, or one of any of that great body of departments which, though quite unseen, cause a carrier to live and to move.

The flight deck, after all, is but the main showpiece for all this hidden endeavor. The flight deck is but the climax to all the millions of things which take place beneath it and which have to fit together.

There are almost as many decks below sea level, of course, as there are above it. In the case of a carrier, the hangar deck is the last one down from which the outside can be seen at all, and then only when the side doors and side hatches are open. Yet the hangar deck itself is pretty high. It's as high as the main deck of most big vessels.

As an indication of whether or not a sailor has been at sea, "that good old suntan" means exactly nothing. He may have been at sea on a carrier constantly for a year and still be paler than a rookie in a bootcamp. Very few sailors, though, want to step ashore on liberty next time (if there is a next time, and if there is a liberty) looking as if they were in the third stage of tuberculosis.

This may be one of the reasons, then, why the forward flight deck can look at times like an unfortunate battlefield, one on which the sprawled participants not only have been knocked out but also have been looted of their clothing. Men and officers sprawl every which way, absorbing not only the daylight but also the tar from the hot decking.

Yes, sunbathing could be called an amusement, undoubtedly, but one which has to be snatched whenever it can be snatched, and one which terminates the instant the planes begin operating aboard again, something which can occur any moment.

"Dear Ma: We attend motion picture shows. Yours truly—"

On those rare nights at sea when the hangar deck isn't stuffed with planes (but you name such a night) the screen for a fact has been lowered there, all possible light-outlets to the ocean have been sealed, and the men and officers off watch, bringing their own things to sit on, are invited to look at a picture providing they are not interrupted by a G.Q.

In port it's different. During those times when the vessel is

safe in port, a picture is shown virtually every night. The planes are away. There is plenty of room on the hangar deck. And, next to being allowed to go ashore, the picture show presumed is the runner-up.

It is not for us aboard this carrier to pose as authorities on what kind of pictures are shown aboard other sea-going vessels. We have heard rumors that vessels as well as shore stations often get to see pictures before they are released to the public theaters. We have heard a lot of things, many of which no doubt could be verified. Aboard this carrier, though, we are not in a position to verify them.

All we have to go by are our own pictures shown aboard this carrier, and they seem to have been sent to us with the forward-looking thought in mind that if our carrier is lost, then the films which went down with her will not have contributed to the loss a very great deal.

As for the pictures, we are lucky to have them at all. Even while looking at such plots as concern Gay Youth gladly going to hell in the Coolidge era, we can still keep reminding ourselves that Caesar's legions didn't have any motion pictures whatsoever while far from home invading Gaul. Nor did the fleets of the Philistines, if the Philistines had fleets. So we are lucky, indeed we are, that modern war has been made so comfortable.

But just the same there comes a selfish yearning once in awhile aboard to see one picture, merely one, which has been filmed within a reasonable space of time since the days of Rin-Tin-Tin. But mind you now, this is not criticism. It is merely that, as we sit there on the benches, we do have our dreams.

“Dear Ma: We wrestle—”

A wrestling match aboard this carrier is conducted somewhat

differently from the wrestling matches between university teams, or even somewhat differently from the professional ones in an arena. In those affairs we generally had a fair conception, more or less, of just who was wrestling with whom. At least they were billed ahead of time with that situation in mind.

But a wrestling match aboard this carrier is something which starts when an "Airedale" happens to have his back turned. These youngsters may have been pushing planes around all day on that hot flight deck, but let there come a moment's lull, or let them be grouped on the deck waiting for the next orders, and one of the "Airedales" is sure to feel a sharp bellytwister from behind. This starts it. But where it ends is up to the Almighty.

They may have their own rules in regard to the wrestling they do. If so, these rules never have been officially published. Nor to our knowledge have they even been passed on by a committee for either analysis or acceptance.

So far as can be detected by the nude eye, these wrestling matches consist of as many as possible on one side and one on the other. When he is down, which means he is way, way, way down, then the contestants, without filing notice of their intentions, suddenly wheel on the guy who may be sitting on top.

Any mother, but specifically a mother with a mind on the week's laundry, would have cause to commit suicide at what she would see here. Shirts become something which henceforth she could use only for braided rugs. She will see dungarees turned into such tarry blackness that the only way to purify them again would be with a match. She will see somebody running away with what appears to be her boy's ankle, but which will turn out to be what remains of his sock.

Yet at the sudden sound of a signal the wrestlers disentangle. How they manage to do so is their own secret. But anyhow they

become "Airedales" again, and while scampering off to their posts their own personal inventories of themselves must wait.

"Dear Ma: We paint words on bombs and some of them are not nice words—"

Yet this phase of entertainment aboard is all part of something else, perhaps, and as such should come later.

21

WE ARE now well within range of enemy patrol planes, and so the sky has become of more interest to us than merely as something which holds up the sun. This is always the way of it when closing in on the enemy's home grounds.

We want the weather to give us a "front," meaning we would prefer a thin layer of clouds over us as well as a bank of clouds ahead of us. But the aerological officer, a thorough one, is not allowing himself to become sidetracked from science merely to make optimists out of us.

The instructions to our own scout planes today included this phrase: "... if you see Jap patrol boat, go out of your sector and destroy the bastard."

Much as we would like to slip within bombing range of our target without the enemy knowing of our coming, our chances of doing so would not receive much support aboard if put to a wager.

These are the hours when the old carrier veterans among us are being heeded in every little conversational suggestion they make.

These old carrier veterans appear older in years than they are in reality. They remember the days when carriers were being bumped off with a gruesome regularity, and when carrier-fighting was still in its infancy. Though our equipment and tactics have received a world of changes since then, nevertheless it's the carrier veterans among us who have the sweaty palms these hours. Not for themselves are their palms sweating. They're sweating for the ship.

Men and officers aboard who have had carriers blown out from under them in the early days are not forever talking about the fact. Nor do they do the opposite by remaining awesomely silent. Some published accounts, with a yen towards the dramatic, have overdone this about such men and officers, and it is too bad. It is worse than that, it is embarrassing.

For these officers, and they know it themselves, have a lot to teach from past experience gained the hard way. And, contrary to some reports, these officers would be the first to laugh at themselves if, on the anniversary of some sinking, they were expected to sit around en masse with a pious case of the blues.

They will remember the affair, all right. They will remember it pretty deeply. But then they will remember a lot of other things too as the months of war roll along and pile up. The thing on which they are concentrating right now is to get this carrier safely in to the attack and, God willing, safely out again.

Their sweaty palms and their many cigarettes are evidence, not of black memory as such, but of many memories combined with the present responsibilities. And the two combined do make for a good working team.

The big bombs are receiving their final preparations down below in the magazines for the final loading. When the planes

are ready on the flight deck to receive them, the bombs will be hoisted on the ammunition elevators to be secured in the bomb racks.

The bombs include daisy-cutters, and two-thousand-pounders, and one-thousand-pounders, and five-hundred-pounders. When all is ready for them they will be wheeled over the decks on hand-pulled carts by lads who just a few years ago were pulling coaster-wagons on the hillsides back home.

But these lads still have home quite a bit in mind, for that matter. And this seems the more pronounced because the place on which the bombs are to be used is such an outlandish hunk of geography that the grade-school teachers back home neglected, no doubt, ever to mention its name. Yet today, to these same boys, the place suddenly has become the most mentioned place on earth.

But the words they are chalking on the bombs is evidence of where at least portions of their minds remain even at the present moment.

"Just sending some scrap from Los Angeles."

"From Brooklyn to Tojo with the compliments of Ernelio's crew."

"Bet you get a big bang out of this. 'The Boys from Butte.' "

"Here I come big and loud from Texas."

So it goes with the crews down below in the magazines. The kids down there below have worked hard with these bombs, and some of the crews will continue right on through with the delivery of the bombs to their final racking in the planes. But after that—well, it's the same old story. It will be others who get to watch the explosions.

And now comes the time, too, when others are angling for the opportunity to watch these mentioned explosions. The Day-

before-Christmas has nothing on the political attitude of some young sailor who wants desperately to hook a plane ride over Japanese territory. Nor are the youngsters alone in this. But they are more frank, at least, in explaining why they are being so good.

For example, here's a conversation which was picked up at random, partly inside the photographic laboratory and partly outside of it. The speakers were entering the laboratory while they talked.

"How big's this place we're going to bomb?"

The answer was given him in square-mileage.

"Yeah? You mean it's *that* big? Well, just the same I'd trade it all for a square foot in Mississippi. Yet now that I'm here I oughta look at it, I suppose. Who'll take me, do you know?"

"Nobody'll take you. So forget it. You're no use in a plane."

"I gotta get somebody who'll take me, and I think I know how to do it. I was talking to a orderly, a orderly to—well, I can't tell you now. But this orderly says—"

"Sure. Come on with it. So this orderly says—"

"He says if next time we get back in port if I—"

"If you stand his watch, I suppose. Well, listen to this: no orderly'll ever get you a ride in a plane. You oughta know that."

"I'm sorta thinking the same thing myself now. But just the same—"

"Just the same you might as well forget about it. What can you do in a plane? You're not a rear gunner. You can't navigate, God knows. You're not a radioman. You're just a bunch of deadweight. What pilot would want that?"

"But Carl now, he's going. He's only a photographer second, but he's going. I saw him just awhile ago, and is ~~HE~~ happy. You could've turned him into a banana."

"Sure Carl's going. I knew all that already. He's going. Sure he's going. But he's going to take pictures."

"Well, that's what I was coming in the lab to see you about. I was wondering if you'd show me right away how to work a camera."

"Listen, sister. You don't learn how to work a camera in one easy lesson. You don't learn how to work a camera in two easy lessons. Nor three. Not these air cameras anyhow you don't learn how to work."

"All right. All right. I was just asking. But it seems like if Carl—"

"Forget Carl. Forget everything. You aren't going to go up in no plane. So just keep your pants on."

All of which is merely one more of the same old signs that D-day is even closer now.

22

CONSIDERABLE unfinished business remains to be completed aboard here, including a painting of the carrier herself. The Navy artist at work on the job would like to have the painting finished before, let us say, the carrier becomes obsolete.

But privacy aboard this carrier, despite her size, is as much an unknown quantity as aboard any vessel small or large. The one big exception to this remark is in regard to current events aboard. The vessel is so huge that, like a city, something can be occurring somewhere, like an accident, and by the time the news reaches the rest of the ship the story will be enlarged.

For instance, should one of the sailors on the hangar deck be

injured by a spinning propeller, by the time the rest of us hear of it the details will have been magnified into terrible dimensions.

Or again, as in a city too, the heavier tragedies may be delayed in making the rounds. It is as if they are so bad that everybody hesitates to believe them.

The other evening, for example, while most of us were down below for mess one of our bombers, coming in late for a landing from patrol duty, smashed into the sea not far astern of us. The bombs exploded with the contact and we lost both the pilot and the gunner. Yet many of us who were below at the time did not learn of the accident until morning.

On a carrier of this size, then, there is no way for everybody aboard to know everything that is going on all the time. Yet all of us aboard do know fairly well what the artist has been trying to paint. We know because all of us have taken an uninvited hand towards helping him.

The artist has experimented with all sorts of rooms for privacy, but the ending of each experiment is the same. Finally he has given up searching for the impossible, meaning seclusion, and has gone completely the other way by using the group commander's office for a studio. The group commander's office aboard this carrier is not only an office but also a thoroughfare. Yet the artist quite wisely decided he might as well go the whole way.

Some day somebody will write a treatise on why people like to watch people paint. This is hardly the place for it. Yet whoever may decide in the future to do such a treatise may find here a note of affirmation for his chapter: ARTISTS AT SEA ARE LOOKED AT TOO AND MAYBE MORE SO.

Nobody would be at a loss, of course, to explain why our carrier is so personal to us and why we are so anxious for the

artist to do right by her. That part of it is self-explanatory. But when the artist's soul is truly tried, among all his other trials, is when we begin dictating to him the kind of clouds we want in the background. There are those aboard, it so happens, who retain a homesick fondness for the good old clouds over the Ozarks on a windy day. There are others who remember the winter skies of Montana. Others aboard think the artist is ruining our ship by putting in clouds at all. "People'll look at them clouds and not at her."

But the true gravity comes with the signal flags.

The signal flags have been painted letter perfect, naturally, and in the literal sense. But the battle signal flags are about twice the size of the ordinary ones. When they are hoisted they hide a goodly portion of the island structure, and a goodly portion of some of the gun nests up there.

The schools of thought surrounding the artist become intensely divided, then, on whether the battle signal flags should be used or the ordinary ones. And, sad to say, there is a selfishness associated with the arguments. To be even more frank about it, the arguments are not all for art's sake.

"But those are my guns you're blinding out there when you use battle flags. I say God damn it, no. That's where I stand watch."

"But look, Slat, we want the carrier pictured going into action. Get it. We don't want her just to look like she's on any old cruise." He then will turn to the artist for substantiation. "Isn't that so?"

But the artist by now has learned to say nothing, absolutely nothing.

It is strange, too, how many persons aboard have not seen a painting being painted before. Or an artist at work. They have heard about such things, of course, and have read about them.

Yet there is a wholesale explanation for this in a significant remark by one member of a conflicting jury: "But you see, there are more people aboard this ship than there were in my whole county back home."

This is why, to some of these younger people aboard, it seems almost too good to be true that here is an artist in the flesh and you can go right up and talk to him.

Once the newer ones begin suspecting, however, that the artist is a human being and that, as such, he also may be prone to mistakes, then the next step for them to take is a comparatively easy one. It merely means that, as an artist, in their opinion he may not be so hot, unless his painting is an exact blueprint of the subject done in color.

If any item aboard, whether a catapult or a capstan, has been left out, or even so much as blurred, then the operator of that particular item feels he has been "left out of the picture." He has been personally slandered by the artist, and perhaps deliberately.

Originally the artist may have felt a bit bewildered by performing before such a perpetually changing jury of advisers. If so—he still does.

23

THE flyers in one of the readyrooms tonight were given an informal talk on how to exist on an atoll if ever, after being forced down, they reached an atoll. None of the talk was what could be called encouraging. The flyers didn't think so either, and neither did the speaker. So the meeting more or less wound up in a free-for-all gab fest about the contents of their

little jungle-kits, and how these kits might be useful after the war to take camping.

One of the reasons why the talk wasn't as tense as it might have been under other circumstances was the foreknowledge held by all of us, including the talker, that few if any atolls exist around this particular part of the Pacific.

Or if they do exist they already are surrounded or occupied by the enemy. The same goes for any of the rare islands within a thousand miles from here.

The one hope, then, after being forced down during the attack, is to be picked up out of the sea by our own people. On paper this may sound easy, and it always sounds rather matter-of-fact too when such incidents are announced later in the newspapers.

But we have lost flyers and their gunners who have not been picked up either during or after an attack, despite our efforts to relocate them after once their yellow life jackets or their tiny rubber boats have been sighted from the air.

During such harassing searches the Pacific, which is big enough to begin with certainly, seems to expand beyond all conception of space and trickery. The tiny raft will have been seen there or there, and the location recorded. But when something which is capable of taking the flyers aboard is sent out to the spot, and necessarily from a distance of many miles, the little raft just isn't there any more. It doesn't seem to be anywhere.

Both current and wind may have taken a hand in the disappearance, all right. But there seems to be an even more intangible hiding force at work than either of these, or perhaps a combination of forces of which the ocean's own magnitude is only one. The item being sought is less than a dot. It is, if anything, but a hazy discoloration on a field of a million discolora-

tions. The ocean, when crossed by sunpaths, is of no given color whatsoever. It is of all colors, and they are forever dancing and sparkling, and a tiny raft supplies but one of these.

Of all the tragedies aboard a carrier the tragedy which reaches into the abysmal depths of all hands (and this means all hands) is the knowledge that on the ocean is a rubber boat with one or more shipmates in it, and this boat can be neither reached nor found.

Under ordinary circumstances, meaning circumstances in which a war is not included, the search could be continued indefinitely. But when a task force is deep in enemy waters, and when enemy submarines are expected any moment to begin doing their damndest, the task force commander has the United States to keep in mind, and the lives of a good many thousand under him, as well as a pretty big parcel of fighting properties.

He is an unhappy rear admiral when, despite the success of his force's attack into the enemy's home waters, he finally has to leave while knowing he is leaving a little rubber boat somewhere out there, too.

If the decision were put up to the crews of the task force, no vote would have to be taken nor any ballots counted. The thought of not being able to reach or to find shipmates left floating—especially when enemy land is the nearest possible land—is such a repugnant thought to American sailors that the destruction of themselves and their whole task force appears preferable. They would stay.

But a vicious war of this sort cannot, unfortunately, be won by emotions, even the task force commander's, and so with that we have had to steam away.

So the flyers in the readyroom tonight were not letting themselves be fooled too much by the possession of these jungle-kits. They were being examined more as an amusement than as

a sanctuary. The Pacific of course does contain islanded waters where these jungle-kits are of supreme value, but the location of the coming attack is not in such waters. Just the same—Yes, there is always that “just the same—” There is always *that* chance.

The speaker was anything but heavy in his talk as he described the way that crawfish can best be captured in the coral reefs, and how fish can best be speared or hooked, and how coral cuts can be poisonous, and how certain fish can be poisonous as well, and how . . . and how . . . and how . . . No, he was not being too heavy or professorial about any of this, but was drawing on his own experiences most of the while, and he kept the flyers laughing. They liked his talk, which is as it should be.

For in any of these last-hour readyroom conferences, such as that tonight, the one item about which the flyers need not be reminded is that they are going out on a serious mission. They may as well be reminded that the ocean is wet and that the ocean is deep. Any Fourth-of-July type of oration would be equally ridiculous. For each time these young men take off this flight deck in enemy waters, they are performing by deed what orators limit to voice. That much is obvious. At least it is obvious to those who give the final instructions.

For instance, here are the closing words of one squadron skipper: “Each of you knows the target you’re to hit—hit it!”

As an indirect contribution to tonight’s readyroom confab, two pilots arrived aboard early this evening from another carrier in the force. They had not arrived to pay a call, for such things are not done out here, at least under present circumstances. But for some reason they were forced to land on our carrier instead of on their own. They showed us how they hoped they had solved the problem of their automatics by hav-

ing them wrapped in cellophane sticker-tape, and then soaked in wax.

So tonight, among all the other things, our pilots in the readyroom talked about their automatics too, and how the visiting pilots may have had the right idea. Nobody argued over the fact that revolvers would not be of much use very long once they had been soaked in the sea. That part of it would not have made an argument. But several of the pilots submitted orally, and sometimes rather loudly, their own versions of how their automatics might best be protected.

"The Jap now," one of the flyers said, "protects most of his stuff in rubbers, and you know the kind I mean. Only they got all kinds of sizes. They got great big rubbers, little bitta rubbers, medium-sized rubbers, they got all kinds of them things."

"And don't I know," another flyer interrupted. "We once found a dead Jap flyer who had his automatic in a special bag like that. We took the rubber—it must have been more'n a foot and a half long—and sent it back to a friend of ours in the States. We wrote him: 'This will give you an idea of the men we are fighting.' I don't know what the friend thought. We haven't heard from him yet."

24

THE night was too perfect. There was no wind, and this worried us. We hoped for a wind before starting the launchings within a comparatively few hours, and felt that the wind might come. But at the moment the sea around us was as flat as the flight deck itself.

Many of us who happened to be off watch during the first

part of the night preferred not to go below. We could not explain the reason even to ourselves, and so did not try. The odd tranquillity of the flight deck may have had something to do with it. For within a short while this same flight deck, as we knew, would be turned into a blizzard of propellers, and of orders being signalled as fast as they could be signalled in the darkness.

Between now and then some of us would get no sleep. This would be due partly to our own fault, and partly to the knowledge that unofficial reveille would be starting throughout the carrier anyhow at two o'clock, and would be continuing until the final reveille an hour or so before dawn.

The balmy night was such that if we had been on a liner in peacetime we would have been hanging around on deck talking about the night even as we were talking about it on the flight deck of this carrier. This thought was nobody's exclusive property, nobody's own origination exactly. Any number of us repeated the thought, and some even embellished it by bringing a girl into the picture. She would be aboard the same fanciful liner on the same sort of night and under the same quarter-moon.

"Just think," somebody mimicked. "I've always wanted to take a cruise to Japan. I've saved my money, and finally when I had enough I sold my little grocery store and I said to Edna, my wife, I said: 'Honey, our working days are over. We're going to do what we've always dreamed of doing, we're going to take a cruise to the Orient.' So here we are."

The joke received a few gurgles from us, not many, but a few. And yet to those of us who had known this Pacific so well during the past quarter-century, and who had transcrossed so many of these same waters in previous years, the gag did not seem to be a gag so much as it seemed to be merely one more

additional spin to our own mental Catherine wheels. Either we could have been asleep and dreaming about being out here today under circumstances like these, or the other way around with all our yesterdays as the dream. We could not quite make out which was which. At least the older ones among us could not, and we commented on that too. We compared our mental notes.

But this phase of it didn't last long. It was but a quick mutual dip into fancy, and then it was over.

Down below on the hangar deck the mechanical crews continued working through the night with the planes down there, re-checking them and their bomb-loads. Those planes down there had to be as prepared for the morning's first take-off operations as the planes already on the flight deck aft of where we were standing and talking.

The pre-dawn take-off operations, according to plan, called for two of the carrier's three elevators to be used constantly, even while the planes made their get-away down the deck. Not only that, but the same plans called for these ships to be already warmed up, with their propellers spinning, while being hoisted on the elevators. The pilots also were to be in the planes on the hangar deck, riding up with them on the elevators, and ready to go.

The planes from the elevators would be signalled off the flight deck almost as fast as they appeared from down below, and the elevators would drop again for another load. Meanwhile the planes already on the flight deck would be taking off at the same time.

All these operational plans, to repeat, remained in our minds even as we talked about other things. We were aware that if all went well the carrier, under the pressure of these conditions, would show herself at her acme of teamwork. We felt confident

she could do it, with the elevators and all, because we already had seen her do it, while making a previous attack somewhat similar to what this one was supposed to be. But even last night there remained in our minds always that haunting thought: But you never know.

Somebody suggested that we go below for a game of acey-deucey before going on our watches. But nobody responded to the suggestion. It was not an acey-deucey night, that was all, even though our carrier happens to be an acey-deucey vessel. Other vessels happen to be cribbage vessels, and still other vessels happen to go in for something else. But whatever it is, the word "happen" appears to be the only explanation of how certain vessels make their choice and stay with it. Anyhow, last night we didn't feel like leaving the flight deck to play acey-deucey.

We continued jabbering about anything that came to mind, anything whatsoever, and the reason perhaps was to help offset the peculiar sensation of the flight deck remaining so silent.

One young sailor, an assistant to one of the officers in our group, saw us standing there in the darkness, and he asked us what he should do in regard to a letter from Spokane. He had been carrying the letter around unanswered quite a while apparently, and now he guided us behind a nearby dim-out door inside the island where we could read the wording.

Between the letter's salutation and the signature the wording consisted of two sentences: "Darling, I'll be true to you. Send me \$50."

Having nothing else to do we made up answers for him, all of which he rejected with a laugh as fast as they were made, and there was little doubt but that he rather enjoyed owning the letter he had received. On a bulkhead in this island room

is a motto. He pointed at the motto and grinned: "That's me, I guess."

The motto reads:

*Observe the Turtle
He makes Progress
Only when his Neck
Is Out.*

The sailor added: "But if you think this is a hell of a letter I received you oughta seen the one another guy aboard got. It'd make you turn up. The guy who got the letter read it to us, then said: 'Christ to God, does she think I'm a ghoul?' That's what he said, and threw it overboard. I don't blame him. It was one of them V-letters too, and she had the nerve to have it sent V-letter."

"Well," one of us asked, "what did it say?"

"You know now I forget just how it was worded. Isn't that funny now I'd forget."

"Oh, you remember how it was worded all right, sonny. But you just want to forget it anyhow. Isn't that it?"

"Yes, sir, that's it, I guess. But I didn't think dames could be like that. It said: 'My husband is missing in action so come and see me.' And it said some other stuff too."

"Well, forget it, boy, and get some sleep." We left him and returned outside to the flight deck.

Three more hours. Then two. Then one.

Our ship's band gave a concert on this same flight deck just before sunset last night. It was a regular concert with concert music, and not the other kind. It was given outside here so that the captain, who cannot leave the bridge, could hear it too.

The members of the band, standing in a circle, played while dressed as usual in their customary working dungarees. Most of them are the "talkers" while at battle stations.

25

THE hush which came over our carrier after the last of our planes had whirled off the flight deck into the darkness was a hush which burned right into our bodies.

Somebody compared the flight deck at that moment to a football field after the teams have gone away and after the crowds have left. There may have been something to the comparison but it did not reach deep enough. It did not explain the eeriness we all felt. It was more, too, than the quick transition from the roaring turmoil to the dead silence.

The take-offs down the dark deck had been fast but they had not been perfect. One of the torpedo planes with its bomb-load did not make it. During the last few yards the plane wobbled, something happened, and it went over the side.

We saw the plane go over, but there was nothing to be done about it. We could not stop. The carrier, going at her top speed to create what launching-wind she could, had to continue going, the remaining pilots taking off regardless. Their intervals were timed to the fineness of seconds.

The fallen plane was reported by someone to have been seen still above surface as we scraped past the spot. Life preservers had been snatched from the deck and thrown over. But it would be up to the destroyers somewhere in the darkness behind us to try to make the rescue.

The ocean was black and the sky was black, but the sky had

strange stars in it. They were faint stars of blue and red. They became fainter as they circled around us and upward. The squadrons were collecting themselves, joining together up there, each plane to its own kind.

By all the laws of chance, collision after collision should have occurred in the darkness above us. In getting together squadron by squadron, with so many carriers operating, there should have been confusion in recognizing one another's faint lights. Even by using such peculiarities as exhaust flames as a further recognition guide, there still should have been a big percentage to fail.

Perhaps if we thought about it, our own neck muscles would have been aching. From the bridges and nests of the island structure we had strained forward with each take-off, we had stretched our necks with each plane as it churned down the flight deck to jump into darkness.

Though we were still a blacked-out ship, there were some concealed blobs of light on deck to mark a sort of hidden trail for the pilots, but these blobs didn't amount to much. The flames from the exhausts, though, meant a lot to the rest of us. By them we could tell if the pilot was going to make it or not. If he wobbled along the deck we could not breathe.

There was always a dip-off at the end when the exhaust flames dropped from sight. If they didn't come right up again, and instantly, and circle off to port, then we grabbed each other's arms and held them. It may have been some crazy sort of mutual prayer.

Some of the other carriers with us did not have perfect luck with their launchings either. It would be too much to expect. We could follow the blue-reddish stars from those flight decks with more of an onlooker's detachment than we could our own.

Besides, our planes were all off and away while some of the

others were still taking off. We felt proud about this, and a little smug. We would thump one another, point into the darkness and say: "Look, they're still taking off over there. What do you think about that?" It was silly, but it made us happy—happy as a unit for our ship.

A few times, though, distant stars did not rise as fast as they should. We would stare then, and not say anything at first. The star, after leaving some distant flight deck which we could not see, would remain at the same low level too long. The horizon, if there had been a horizon visible as such, would have remained above the star instead of below it. But instead of holding its own, even there, the star might begin slipping ever so slightly.

We fairly could feel the pilot doing everything he knew, throwing into the sinking plane every trick he ever had learned. If he could only hold his own for another two seconds, we would think. Or another second— Well, usually he did.

Sometimes the light, after moving so low that it was blended into its own reflection along the sea, would begin making an intervening space, ever so gradually, between itself and its reflection. Those were the moments when we could not talk at all. Other than that, there is no determining how we behaved or what expressions we assumed. We would have needed our own onlooker for that, and we had none. We would be as one person staring at the light and its reflection, and we would be trying with whatever might we had to push wider the distance between light and reflection.

"It's up!" Who among us would yell it first we would not know. Maybe nobody among us would yell it first. Maybe it wasn't even yelled. Maybe the words formed themselves of their own accord, and condensed around us in the image of sound.

But there were the few other times too, the times when the light and its reflection would refuse to separate, and when finally they would come together completely, leaving but the ember of a quick little flash.

Lacking anything to say, we nevertheless felt we had to say something. "A destroyer will get him, I bet." And soon we would be far away from that locality also. He and his gunner and the fallen plane would be but another distant part of the night back there, and the best we could leave them was words.

From which section of the sky to expect the first appearance of dawn was something about which we never were quite certain. That is, unless we looked at a compass. During the launchings our carrier had been swung around to meet head-on whatever breeze there might have been. But afterwards we had swung another way to be on the course called for by the operational plans. Meanwhile, too, we were zig-zagging. So the first break on the horizon might appear just any old place. We really didn't care where, but we looked for it.

And when the break came, during those earliest shadings of pre-dawn, was when the vacancy of our flight deck struck all of us as something far more personal than mere vacancy. We had seen it vacant before. So now we knew that vacancy was not the whole answer to what we were thinking.

How was Willie doing by now, we wondered. And how was Monk doing. And how were Jake and Denny and Slats and Old Kid Wampas, the one who said the only thing he didn't like about going out on these air attacks was that you couldn't hear the bastards down there squeal. "With infantry now," he added, "it's different."

Maybe in the darkness our squadrons missed the target. Maybe they by-passed it. Maybe they were still hunting for it. If so, how about their fuel supply? Maybe the Japs were play-

ing a game right along, and knew we were coming in all the time. Maybe it was an ambush. Maybe—

Our ship's radios are tuned to intercept messages, but we dare not send any. While waiting for the first word about our flyers, it was ridiculous the queer things we did with our hands. One of the chiefs pottered around trying to fix the handle of a coffee percolator which really didn't need fixing. At least the twisted handle had been that way for more than a month now, and nobody had seemed to notice it.

Two of the waiting officers began talking about zippers, their own included, and in such a heavy manner that neither officer listened to what the other one said.

Up in the island structure our spotters, wearing their tin helmets, watched through glasses for enemy aircraft. All of us had our tin helmets with us or else within easy reach. But a ready-room is really the place to be while waiting. Some of us moved there. Remaining on the screen were the last teletyped orders to the flyers before manning their planes. On the screen would be flashed, too, a teletype of the first intercepted word.

Somebody tried to ease the tension by saying: "Just like election night."

"God, if it isn't!"

But nobody laughed. Nobody at all in that room laughed. Nobody anywhere laughed.

26

EVEN as with our own lives, ships also have their own days which cannot be segregated into continuity. Too many things overlap within any given hour. The pattern of the day

may be left suspended and without borders. A design may be there in the weaving, but the design is only a suggested one and may turn out to be something else entirely. Threads which should be finished are left unfinished, and through nobody's fault. Other threads may come to a quick end even before they get started.

Of all warships, especially can this be true of carriers. And especially can it be true of carriers on D-days.

For a carrier's pattern of operations, as previously mentioned, continues to be a sort of fourth-dimensional one even during an engagement. The pattern reaches beyond the surface, and it reaches beyond sight. It extends as far as its farthest plane extends, and it extends as high as allowed by the oxygen tanks. Each of these tangents is a thread then, and if under the pressure of the weaving, these threads get lost or snap, the day's design automatically may change.

But the carrier nevertheless remains the core for her own pattern. From her it is that the threads are started, and it is to her that they intermittently return. Back and forth they go, and in and out, and yet the weaving is so spacious and so complex that no individual can hope to follow each strand of it. Such is D-day.

The carrier's own gunners, for instance, want to shoot. And they are part of the core. But they feel they are being left out of the bigger picture. They are wrong in this supposition, of course, but just the same they want to shoot. They want to shoot their 40-millimeters and their 20-millimeters, the ones bearing such painted names as Rose, Ellen, Adelaide, June, Marge, Mid-Cathie, and so on; and the gunners want to shoot these guns at enemy planes.

By the looks of things, though it is too early to tell, the day for these ship's gunners may not be one of those blasting days

so familiar in stories by now: "... three waves of Jap planes repulsed by ship's gunners. . . ." Yes, the gunners would like to re-enact this old familiar sub-head. That much at least seems obvious. And it seems obvious, also, that most of them conveniently have decided to ignore an equally familiar tag-line: "... but one Jap plane got through. . . ."

But our carrier herself, if allowed to speak for herself, would express satisfaction, no doubt, about letting things go along as they have been going since daylight. She at least has not had the guts torn out of her by an ambush or by any other surprise. She appears to be happy about the way she has been handled. She deliberately has not been thrown into something which could not pay off. And in return, should there come an emergency, she will make up for it. This seems to be her promise. And her own ship's gunners can get their chance then the same as the other little gunners in the planes are getting their chance now.

If the day so far could have been ended with a natural finale as a curtain-act, then one of the pilots already has performed it. In the whole pattern of the morning, as woven up-to-date, the pilot's act by no means is the biggest. Nor is it the smallest. It is perhaps but one of those sub-acts which, if properly placed at the end, would have made a clincher to any D-day program.

The act did not come at the end, though, and that is the trouble with it, and that is the trouble with engagements in general. They do not follow the rules of good theater any more than a day's pattern will always stick to its original design.

This pilot had returned to the carrier later than the others of the first wave. We had given him up. We had thought that he too might be among the other few still missing. We already had learned that our pilots on their first run had done a great job. But before learning it we had drenched ourselves in coffee, we

had stared at the clock, we had hugged around a little radio in the radio-room, we had watched the teletypes on the screen in the readyrooms, we had been putting together our own conclusions before having on hand, really, much from which to conclude.

"They're coming back! They're ours and they're coming back!"

Once again, then, we scrambled up into the island structure, and by the time we got there a squadron already was circling the carrier for the first landings.

Each squadron, the same as on ordinary days, would take its turn if possible about landing. The squadrons would tier themselves in layers, each successive squadron standing off or circling high waiting its time to come down and in and on.

As each plane landed, and then taxied up past us, we could determine fairly well what the story had been. We would look simultaneously both at the pilot and for damage. Usually the pilot, relieved at being aboard again, would be grinning. He would throw a thumb up and grin. The shot-up conditions of their planes seemed immaterial to the pilots for the moment, just so long as they were back on that deck at last.

Those who were hurt did not have to say so. It was written all over their faces. Or else the pilot's first gesture would be to motion quickly back towards his rear-seat gunner.

The flight surgeon and his assistants were on the flight deck forward all the time, awaiting each plane. The planes were being crowded together up there to keep the landing space cleared aft. For this reason the planes, on being crowded together, would become as one big confusing cluster to us from our distance up in the island.

"Who's the Doc helping to get out?"

"Can't tell from here."

"Looks like Mike's plane. Isn't that his number?"

"Can't—can't tell from here—might be. Damned if I don't think it is."

In this manner the morning continued. Incident overlapped incident. Some of the pilots whom we thought we had lost were later reported to have been forced to land on other carriers. Others of our pilots were reported flying in good shape when last seen, but now were reported nowhere. The threads of continuity were once again designing their own pattern and we could not follow all of them.

But everything considered, we had to admit it had been a good morning, especially when compared to what it could have been. Still—

"Clear flight deck for emergency landing! Stand clear of all runways!"

And this was when the otherwise lost pilot did such a beautiful job of it, the job which should have been the finale to any D-day.

On arriving late, after we had given him up, he circled the carrier to show his condition to the flight officers, and to receive their signalled orders on what they wanted him to do. He was at the bottom of his gas, his landing-hook as well as his flaps had been shot away, and his brakes were gone. Undoubtedly there were other troubles as well.

The flight officers had to take everything into consideration, the safety of the carrier and everything, and make their decision quickly.

"Here he comes, by God. Here he comes right in the groove! Here he comes—"

On landing upon the flight deck he had nothing to stop his speed except his own maneuverability and whatever he could

use for brakes. But our combined prayers may have had something to do with slowing down that plane. It came up to the first barrier, caught it by the propeller, tipped slightly onto its nose. But there it stayed.

The pilot was left sitting at a high funny angle. He remained sitting up there motionless, as if amazed, as if surely expecting there was still going to be more to it than that.

As soon as we could believe it ourselves we applauded him. We cheered him. We shouted to him. We couldn't help it. And the highly perched pilot, on coming out of his dream, finally heard us. He looked up, saw us lined en masse around the island, and then he did what should be the finale to anything. He bowed. It wasn't a good bow. But it was as good as his harness would permit.

27

A FEW of the rest of us were permitted to fly today on the afternoon wave, and we the privileged ones quickly emptied our pockets of miscellany, borrowed what toggery we could in the readyroom, and did our best to make long straps into short ones, and short ones into lengths that would fit. The cracks we heard were the expected ones:

"Bring us back a geisha girl."

"Be sure now and don't get your feet wet."

"Watch out for lamp-posts."

"In case the bastards get you, how about that thirty-five cents you owe me?"

Meanwhile the new orders were being teletyped on the screen

for our wave. It was "our" wave now, and we felt the responsibility, and once again came the familiar order: **PILOTS MAN YOUR PLANES.**

We scrambled out the rear door of the readyroom, and continued scrambling single file across the same old dark catwalk beneath the flight deck. This old dark catwalk must have by this time as many thoughts associated with it as there are thoughts to be had. Yet the catwalk is hardly the place for reverie. The thoughts come quick and sharp and then they are gone. The walls of certain other tunnels also must be heavy with unfinished thoughts; the tunnels leading into the ancient arenas, the tunnelled bridges to the Tower of London, the tunnels of all the catwalks of all the carriers.

"Woops—sorry I bumped yuh." Then a laugh. "Oh, so it's you. Well, God a'mighty, then I'm not sorry either. I take it all back. Who you flying with?"

"With Willie."

"Then you're a sucker. He'll toss you overboard when things get tough."

"That's what HE says he'll do. But he won't."

"Why won't he?"

"I've got his extra goggles."

"Never thought of that. Well, here's to bombs in your eye."

We had reached the daylight on the other side, and he was gone. He had known in advance where his plane was spotted on deck, and he had trotted directly towards it, wasting no time.

Willie himself then emerged from the tunnel and climbed the brief ladder to the flight deck. He wasted no time, either. "Right this way, my stinkaroo. Right this way." Winding in and out among the other planes to reach his own, he was the guide.

Carrier planes are not constructed with space to spare. Willie

easily could have dodged taking along an added weight.

"Where do you want to ride? The 'greenhouse,' I suppose."

"Yep, the 'greenhouse,' if you don't mind. And remember now you're just the chauffeur."

"We'll see about that later. Do you need a pillow?"

"Sure I do. You know that."

"Well, here it is then." He already had the pillow in his hands, having received it from the plane captain. The "greenhouse" really does need a pillow, for the "greenhouse" has no seat in it. It has instead a sort of imaginative cubicle surrounded by layers of instruments. Wedging oneself in among them, a man feels like one of the instruments too, though not so secure. He needs whatever padding can be obtained to take the place of a safety-belt which is lacking.

But the "greenhouse," being on the topside, and directly behind the pilot, is really the preferable place if one wants a broad look at everything.

We had to hurry. The flight officers already were at work for the take-offs. The green "go" signal, much like an ordinary traffic light though lacking the letters, was lighted on the bridge. We had no more time.

From our plane the faces lining the island structure, and looking down on us, appeared small and distant and expressionless. Yet while up there, and with the situation reversed, we always had seemed to be a collection of expressions first and faces afterwards.

The planes ahead of us were leaving, and then came our turn to be signalled up to the take-off spot. We were there, and we weren't. It seemed all one movement. Willie, after revving his motor, gave the customary nod that all was okay. On receiving the nod, the take-off signal officer snapped down his little flag, then ducked under our starboard wing as we passed over.

Exactly when it was that our wheels left the deck is indefinite. It usually is.

The "greenhouse" contained a set of earphones especially plugged in by Willie for his cargo. One could not talk from there, but he could listen in on the interplane conversations. We circled while joining up with the rest of our squadron. There came Jake and Joe and Denny and the rest of them. They made faces at the "greenhouse" while coming by.

Below and off to one side was our carrier which had seemed so individual to all of us while we were aboard. Now she seemed to be doing her best to extend this individuality out to us while we were leaving. She didn't succeed very well. Or at least she didn't succeed for very long.

Our carrier's special markings faded from our view, and she became in the distance but another carrier in our task force. This is how it seemed, but it wasn't quite so. In shoving us out of the nest she merely had turned from a mother ship into a rather stern old dad. And a dad, furthermore, who may as well have been saying:

"You're now on your own. But give 'em the works."

It was true, the carrier had not brought us all the way out here for the fun of it.

The bomb-load in our own plane consisted of four five-hundred-pounders. The plan was for the squadron to fly low until coming within sight of the target, then soar for altitude, take the measurement, peel off at the given intervals, and come down with all we had.

Each plane had its own assigned target within the main target. There was no mistaking our own operations so far as we ourselves were concerned, but there could be an interruption by the enemy.

By the time this war is over, or even before it is over, so

many Americans the world around will have ridden on bombing attacks that for a fact the men concerned should stock themselves with hand-out printed slips. These slips should bear the answers to the customary questions:

"What does it feel like?"

"Are you scared much?"

"Did you see any Japs you hit?"

"My, it must be an experience, I bet. Isn't it?"

In the case of our own plane, the answers would have to be as indefinite as the questions. Willie says the way to answer is with a "positively, absolutely, irrevocably and definitely possibly."

Out of fairness, though, quite an additional number of things should be taken into consideration before anybody is put on the spot that way with questions. In the case of a carrier, for example, we live the days and the nights through with the pilots. More than that, we are with them in some manner whether they are off the ship or back on her. We know all their collected experiences so well and so deeply that whatever may happen to the rest of us, when we go along with them, will be but a repetition of what already has happened to at least some of them. It is difficult, then, to find anything new or novel or different from what they already have mentioned.

By flying with them we do have the opportunity, of course, to affirm a lot for ourselves. But to affirm is different from to find.

Or if we liked we could make ourselves feel individualistic about it, no doubt, by presuming that our own emotions or our own fears are different from the pilots'. "But they're used to it," we can say. "They never get afraid. They don't mind." Yet for us to take such an attitude not only is nonsense, but comes close to being a terrible lie about them.

Indeed, what makes these young carrier pilots so splendid, and why it's a privilege when they let one go with them, is the very fact that their fears can be the same as your fears. When in a tight spot you know exactly what they are thinking because you yourself are thinking the same. But they know how to come out of it, if such is possible, and you do not.

The pilots may be as afraid at times as you are afraid at times. And yet the next day, or even the next hour, they deliberately will go right up to get afraid all over again.

"See it?" This was Willie's voice coming through the ear-phones. "See it?"

So there it was, the enemy's shore, a hairline in the blue haze.

28

WHILE flying in on that attack wave with Willie, it would have been convenient for us to think we were witnessing, or were about to witness, the entire engagement. We might have been equally pleased to think that, if we did get out of it, we henceforth could consider ourselves an authority or something to that effect in regard to the whole thing.

But this was not our first carrier task force operation, and from experience we realized what a miniature part of it is played by each plane. We were not fooling ourselves, then, as to being eye-witness authorities for the future.

To be complete eye-witness authorities we would have had to be back aboard the carrier at the same time we were away from her out here. We would have had to be aboard all the other carriers simultaneously as well, and aboard all their respective squadrons out flying.

Our own four five-hundred-pound bombs, then, were important only to the extent that they were our plane's individual assignment—on this one trip in. But the plane had been in before with somewhat similar loads and, if it did not get shot down, it would continue coming in as often as called for with the squadron. Almost all the other squadrons of almost all the other carriers would be doing the same. The original plans called for two days of it.

But the original plans were flexible enough, naturally, to be jockeyed around if the enemy interrupted them.

Even while flying we could not help remaining aware of how a big carrier task force engagement, like any other big engagement, is comprised of too many overlapping segments for any individual to see the entirety of what is taking place.

And this fact, if one must be technically blunt about it, can even be true of the flagship of the force. She receives the reports relayed through visual signals from the various bridges. Radio silence from ship to ship, and from ship to plane, continues to be maintained throughout the engagement if at all possible, or else kept down to the minimum. A lot depends on whether or not the task force's locality has been spotted by the enemy, and a lot depends on what happens after the force has been spotted.

Over-all outlines of such engagements no longer are a novelty. That is certain. But always they must come later, much later, if they are to be exact and if they are to be complete.

In the same sense that no one soldier can submit a complete report on the whole battle in which he has participated, no one pilot can do it either. And no one squadron skipper. And no one group commander of a carrier. And no one captain of any of these carriers.

The best any of these participants can do about it is what

they do do about it; and that is to submit their own technical reports, which in turn are grouped with other technical reports which in turn are finally arranged in the one big report—which is the engagement as recorded. And when these pages are grouped together they comprise, conservatively speaking, quite a space.

This is why, too, the back-to-port cruise for any squadron skipper, or for any intelligence officer, or for any group commander, is not a cruise of idle happiness no matter how triumphant the attack may have been.

If the attack has lasted two days and two nights, this merely means to him that the making-out-of-the-reports may occupy twice that long a time if not longer.

But the reports must be ready for the head office when the carrier pulls into harbor. And some of these reports, or at least a general summary of them, may have to be ready before then. It depends on whether, when within flying range of the harbor, a plane is dispatched ahead to carry them.

Indeed, if there must be wars, one almost longs for the old jungle days when no written reports were necessary, and when all one had to do was go out and either lose his own head or else come back with somebody else's dried-up one.

The title "commander of a carrier task force" may sound like a neat title to have, and it *is* a neat title to have. But it also is a neater title to be able to hold down time and again while producing results and not catastrophe. And one wholesale catastrophe is all that is needed.

The task force commander's field of operation is virtually limitless. It extends from the time he leaves his base, and it continues until he is back at it again. And his units are such that they fly far beyond his vision in all directions from him,

with radio silence the while. But they are his units just the same, and his moving flight decks have to be where these units return, since these flight decks are all these units have to return to.

Continual days after days of this sort of thing, before and even after the scheduled engagement itself, must be a good deal like having the responsibility over the nebulous. And the actual days and nights of the engagement, as considered from the flagship, must seem much like the same thing, only more so.

Our own plane, then, was part of this nebulosity too, so to speak. But we didn't think of it that way at the time, certainly. Our plane instead was all we had, and our one propeller was all we had. Nor is a carrier plane, as previously mentioned, the kind of plane in which, or over which, one can climb around and make repairs.

If anything went badly wrong under fire we would land either in the ocean or on the only soil available, which was a concentrated bundle of enemy soil, with several thousand enemies the only people on it.

We wondered vaguely of course, which is the only way one can wonder, about what these people would do to us in case we were knocked down on their land. They most positively would do something, but just what? The choice most definitely would be up to them. There would be all their collected opinions against our own.

Nor would they have to hold onto us while they decided what to do with us; inasmuch as there was no place in all that Pacific close enough for an escape even if we should think of attempting an escape.

Yes, it was strange how our one small propeller could exert such a powerful influence on our lives as to be able to change

them completely. The greatest universities in the world combined could not impress such a change on us, and certainly not so abruptly.

29

THE smoke from the anti-aircraft bursting around us was what was noticeable first. The smoke penetrated inside the plane, and instead of blowing out again it seemed to cling inside. We could not see the smoke exactly but we could smell it, much like the odor of burning cloth, until one might think his own plane was on fire.

The sea beneath us contained circles of strange colors. These circles widened, and more colors appeared in them as they widened. The bubbling circles could have been some strange mixture of boiling candy. We were looking down on the explosions of anti-aircraft fire striking the sea. We could not see the water geyser up from these circles, as we were at the wrong angle for that. We were looking down at them, instead of horizontally, but the bubbling movement of the water was noticeable nevertheless, catching the sunlight and breaking it into fragments.

Either we would come out of all this or we would not. The sensation was not too much unlike flipping a coin; or rather waiting to receive the verdict on a coin which already had been flipped.

Parachutes don't mean so much during a deep dive-glide over that sea. Inside the "greenhouse" the parachute remained more or less a regulation figure of speech. There was not much room for wearing it within the narrow cubicle with all that

equipment, and so off to one side the parachute remained unattached and on top of something. But regulations call for a parachute to be taken along, and so it had been taken along.

Judging by intercepted remarks from their radios, the enemy operators seemed fully as interested in our visit as we were. They were a little crude about it, though, by periodically attempting English in an effort to jam our own interplane talk. One of our planes would receive an order to strafe a certain numbered target again, for instance, and the enemy operator in terrible English would say not to mind, that he was taking that target himself.

At one time, too, the enemy operator with the same brand of English ordered us all to abandon the project immediately and to return to our bases.

Aboard our own carrier much of our talk, as we knew, as well as the jabbering of the enemy, was being overheard by our shipmates at their small radios. But they seemed a long distance from us at the moment, as our ship's radio silence prevented any communication with us, nor were we directly talking to the ship.

Even before our squadron had climbed to altitude for its dive-glide, the enemy's land was recognizable if for no other reason than the presence on it of what could have been a series of spinning tops. These were the dark smokes of fires, of course, but from a distance they did resemble black tops which some giant child, the size of a Cyclops, may have sent spinning there from a string. And our job, as we knew, was to create a lot more of these spinning figures if possible.

The dive-glide itself had been furious enough to allow for few other sensations beyond the mere physical ones of suddenly being yanked downward at a hell of a clip. There was no black-out aboard. There was not that. But it was a moment in which

one was doubly glad not to have the responsibility of the young pilot. You could just say to yourself, if you had time to say it to yourself: "Well, it's up to him, not up to me, to stop this thing." And that was all there was about it.

You didn't have to hold on, for the pressure of the dive itself was taking care of all that for you. You just hoped, was all, that the target for your bombs would still be at the right place at the right split second of time.

What seemed lacking, too, were all those sound effects tuned to our ears by so many years of motion pictures. We should have been hearing a roaring or a screeching as we came down, and we should have been hearing the explosions of other bombs. But, to our own ears anyway, it all seemed rather quiet and rather lonely.

At first we had been up where the air was cold, and then we were down to where the air seemed bumpy with heat waves. But they were not heat waves. Instead, it was heat mingled with the vibrations of shells exploding around us. And the vibrations were different from heat waves too, and different from riding through bumpy air. The plane would be whipped one direction and then, before righting itself, it would be whipped a little more in the same direction.

Our bombs were away!

Not only did we hear these great words through our ear-phones, but also we felt the lightening of the plane as we straightened out.

Yes, our bombs were away and nothing could stop them now. It was a clean feeling. We had gotten our explosives off directly down upon the enemy. Our plane might be stopped, but our bombs never would be stopped. It was too late now for anybody to stop them.

No committee meetings could stop our bombs. No Congressional hearings could stop them. No walk-outs. No questionnaires-to-be-filled-out could stop them. No medical examinations. No bickering in front offices, and no bickering in back offices. Our bombs were on their way down, and we didn't need anybody's influence through anybody else's influence through anybody else's influence to get those bombs to where they were going.

And some of this same feeling, perhaps, is what makes officers and men at sea happier in a strange sort of way than officers and men ashore. We had had the feeling on the carrier, and again we had much the same inexplicable happiness when our bombs let loose. We were delivering, and *had* delivered, and now it was up to us if possible to get out of there.

But that tingling moment of gladness lingered just the same. It was in the voice of the pilot as he spoke through the 'phone, and it was in the voice of the gunner.

Regardless of how indifferent we may be towards others' opinions of us in this war, or regardless of how sensitive we may be to what others may be thinking of us, still at that precise moment when our own bombs are heading for the target we know that, for the instant at least, we are beyond criticism.

In one of the passageways of the carrier is a placard with these words:

*Let's Fight The Enemy
not each other.*

*Let's be patient
be considerate.*

*Keep working and
carry on.*

We've got a War to Win.

After one has passed **the same placard** week after week, month after month, it becomes merely a part of the bulkhead. In fact, the placard may become even less than that; it may do a complete turnabout and become actually funny, especially during those grumbling black hours of a G.Q., when everyone is scrambling through darkness in each other's way to reach his battle station.

But out here, and especially in this torpedo plane, the meaning of such a placard not only is unfunny but it is not trite, either. What is more, such a placard need not be written at all, or carried, at all. And this in a manner is but part of that indescribable cleanliness which one feels with bombs away.

30

SOME enemy planes had been reported in the air. And now, recovering from our drop and having released our load, we were in a better position to look around.

Our fuel supply would not last forever, of course, and Willie had his own time-limit to follow. He was wearing a new waterproof wristwatch he had received from the States. In his state-room the previous night he had pointed to the waterproof watch and had said: "Haven't had a chance to test it in water yet. Maybe I'll test it tomorrow."

We glanced around for other members of our squadron, and one of them came alongside us. He pointed aft towards his rudder, but he didn't have to point. Some of the rudder was there, and some of it was not. He indicated that he would like to ride wing with us.

Willie nodded that he understood.

And then Willie was overheard saying through the 'phone to our gunner: "God damn it to hell no, Billy. God damn it to hell no."

The gunner had wanted to return over our individual target and try to take a snap of what was left of it through his own little camera. It seemed he knew somebody back in Indiana who possibly might appreciate such a personal picture "if it came out good"—which it wouldn't have done.

Though the day was so clear we could see great distances, nothing was clearly defined. We were travelling around and around too fast. Our own planes were diving and maneuvering at all levels. We could look up and see them, and we could look down and see them. Periodically, too, wings which seemed to come out of nowhere would sweep by us in an opposite direction, and then be gone. A hornet must have much the same sensation of viewing blur in motion while buzzing with the rest of his swarm around a dislodged nest.

The ocean sometimes would be up on its side alongside of us like a wall, and against the wall shots were being peppered which enlarged and discolored the designs already there. Or again the ocean would slide away from us completely, and we would have to look for it to find it. Yet as always it was up to the young pilot to bring order out of the thing, and as always, too, one could continue saying to himself: "Yep, it's up to him, not up to me. Am I not lucky?"

Yet throughout all of this, and with the visibility so clear, one did wish he could record a lasting imprint on the mind of all that was going on. But he knew right then how hard put he would be if confronted with the question: "You sure seem awful vague about it. What was the battle like?"

The bigger target itself seemed detached from us in a way. Changes were occurring on the face of it, but these changes

seemed almost as if they were not of our doing. We could not feel, for example, the personal contact of our own blows. We were disfiguring an opponent something awful, and yet seemingly without hitting him at all. Yet scars would grow out of him even as we watched, even as we shadow-boxed around him, without as yet feeling the contact of our own gloves.

The strafing of enemy planes on the runways must have been excellent. We learned later how excellent it really had been. But for the moment, and from up in the air, the results of this strafing had appeared only as a row of little bonfires, like what picnickers would build on a beach. The burning planes appeared as less than that, actually. They appeared as scraps of yellow paper which somebody had forgotten to pick up.

The bigger fires were different. They had volume to them and movement. These must have been the fuel tanks and the buildings. Their flames had a sparkle to them, and a change of colors. Their smoke, though, seemed quite permanent. It would climb in a volume so high, but no higher, and then would stay there, a fixed thing.

But, as with our own dive-glide itself, what was lacking to us again was sound. Flames and smoke denote in our minds crackling and heat. They are synonymous in mental association. A burning building cannot be a burning building, then, unless we hear as well as see the walls crashing down. It becomes instead a painting of a burning building, and perhaps a rather poor painting. To have painted those fires as we saw them would have been at best but an indication of where the fires were, and not the fires themselves. For a true picture, the enemy would have had to do his own paintings, down there on the ground.

Our time over and around the target was up.

A carrier plane not only has to allow enough fuel for the return flight across nothing but ocean to the carrier, but it also is wise to allow for a little extra in case the plane is attacked while getting there, or in case the carrier herself may be under attack.

Our job done, we joined some of our other planes heading away, and Willie said over the 'phone: "Well, another day, another battle."

But it hadn't seemed like that at all. It seemed as if it were now our duty, in fact, to try to decide whether or not we were dead. Or aren't people supposed to do that in the middle of a queer dream?

31

THE pleasure of getting back aboard—home again—will be in direct proportion to the number of other flyers who get there too. Each readyroom is like a barometer in this respect. On entering the respective readyrooms, one need not ask outright what sort of luck the squadron has had.

If the luck has been bad the returning pilots will be talking as usual, but they will be talking in serious groups, trying to patch mysteries together, as they wait their turns to be interviewed by the intelligence officer.

The human equation enters into the score also. Some pilots during their months aboard just naturally have made themselves the life-blood of the squadron. They seem almost to typify the squadron. And when such a pilot has failed to return, the loss to the other members appears triply personal. It is a personal amputation and a personal affront to each of them,

and their impulse is to go right back and do something about it.

"Did you see him go down?"

"No. That's the hell of it. None of us saw him go down. Mike over there thought he saw him get hit, but he was still flying and waved his hand. And just then Mike got hit himself and couldn't see any more because . . ."

This uncertainty is the killing thing in any readyroom, and adds conjecture to conjecture. Nobody knows where on that ocean to search. No clues are obtainable. Nobody can so much as put his teeth into even a remote hope, which in itself would be something, hazy though it might be.

Of all the difficult letters which a squadron skipper writes to some pilot's wife or family the most difficult one is ". . . missing in action. . . ." If the squadron skipper holds out hope in his letter he knows he is lying, and his words show it.

If he is too definite about there being no hope, he knows he may be verging on falsehood likewise. For in his mind, as he writes, will always be the memory of fabulous cases, those one-out-of-a-thousand cases. He cannot find the right words.

He relies for help on the knowledge that at least another week will be spent at sea before the earliest letter can be mailed. And he keeps thinking that within these days the right words may come to him. But they never do.

The right words have been known to come to a squadron skipper after a pilot definitely has been seen to go into the ocean, and definitely not seen to rise, or definitely has been found crushed with his floating wreckage. In such instances the squadron skipper can write his letter, and the shipmates can write their letters, with an outrightness which, if limited at all, is limited only by phraseology. But never limited as to honesty.

As to those carrier pilots whose last minutes over the ocean were not seen by anyone, it's the ocean alone which has the

answer, and the ocean keeps the answer to itself. This is another reason why carrier-flying can be so different from land-flying. For on land somebody sooner or later is sure to know, even if that somebody is an enemy.

Our returning flight to the carrier, consequently, was a return coupled with many silent questionings about what we would learn when we got there. We had seen one of our planes go down while still within range of the enemy, and we had seen another go down at quite a distance from us. We had flown to the localities. Others from our outfit already were there ahead of us, circling the spots, doing what they could from their landplanes, such as throwing down life preservers and the like. We also did what we could, then charted the spots, and they would be our first message on returning aboard.

The day happened to have turned into one of those rare days of exaggerated visibility, so much so that the vessels of our task force seemed to rise halfway up out of the sea to greet us from far away.

As we approached to segregate our own home from among the other carriers, Willie pointed to one in the distance which appeared much like our own. He pointed with sharp little jabs, and kept on doing so. But the only response he received from the "greenhouse" was a negative shake of the head. After all these months, it seemed odd for Willie to be choosing today of all days to be wrong as to our carrier's identity. But he continued pointing, and now it could be seen what he meant.

He was pointing at a diminutive glow aboard the other carrier's flight deck. As we drew nearer, the glow grew in size until now it wasn't diminutive any more.

A plane on landing had broken into flames. The accident was altogether too obvious now. It was altogether too much beyond doubt. Some pilot, instead of being allowed to feel good about

his homecoming, had been handed this surprise lump instead. The burning plane, even as we watched, was being tumbled over the side. So it is that on a carrier one never knows. He never knows, beyond knowing that always he must be ready for anything.

There is no end to the stories about odd carrier-landings. These stories merely continue and continue like the landings themselves. Some pilots on landing are certain to originate against their will something never seen before. The list of oddities merely grows, and when it appears that the saturation point in novel landings must positively be reached pretty soon, it will not have been reached.

The flight deck can roll with the sea, naturally. This roll will not be noticeable when the sea is calm. But when the sea gets sloppy and begins to pitch, then is when pilots are given an additional opportunity to add peculiar landings to the peculiar ones already known.

One day, for instance, a pilot of one of our own torpedo-bombers already had cut his motor and was gliding down to the flight deck exactly as he should be doing. But his plane took an unaccountable bump just as his wheels touched. With his switch cut off he was bumped clear up high again and over the barrier. Had he landed over the barrier he would have landed upon the other planes parked there.

The reason all of us remember the incident so clearly is because it did not turn into an accident. For accidents, even bad ones, can be partly erased from the mind. Worse accidents later have a tendency to surmount the previous ones in memory. But the reason we remember this specific incident so well is because nothing happened.

Acting on instinct, and with only the eyelash of a moment in which to act, the pilot switched his motor back on while in the

middle of the bounce. What occurred at the same moment is too much to expect ever to occur again; in the midst of the bounce the motor caught. It caught instantly, and the pilot grazed over to port and away, having cleared the parked planes and having cleared the ship. But our own memory-vision of the thing is still difficult for us to believe; it was all so quick, it was all so impossible.

Yet some of the other landings we have seen we would as soon forget; and that is how it goes aboard a carrier.

Usually after an engagement, though, such as we had just been on, the pilots are hotter than usual, and landings become in proportion insignificant child's play. It is then that the pilots are at their best in bringing them in, and beautifully, even with the flaps all shot away. But when our pilots are first flying aboard after having been flying ashore in port—it's then that the landing signal officers really have their eyes filled with anxiety and their hands filled with gestures.

Our wheels touched, and now we were aboard, and now we would learn. Now we would learn the best and the worst in our own readyroom.

32

AFTER two days and two nights of attacking, one could have told that the task force was now on its way back to our base if through no other reason than that the scuttlebutt was starting all over again.

The scuttlebutt had to do with where we were going to attack next after we refuelled and replenished our carrier.

At sea there can be no definite let-down after a job has been done. A let-down can be pretended, but this is about all. A big carrier is such a demanding vessel that she insists on attention at all times.

Besides, not only would the enemy be as anxious as ever to get us, but also by this time he should have a fairly precise account of our locality. We continued moving in on deceitful courses, naturally, but enemy submarines and the rest of it could as easily be moving from somewhere to head us off.

More than once, while starting the return, we had been summoned to our battle stations by the announcement that a "boogey" (enemy plane) had been sighted in our vicinity. And at another time four of our fighters closed in on a "snooper" which had been trying to trail us. The first fighter to reach the "snooper," a four-motored job, brought it down so quickly that the three other fighters resented the quickness a little. They had wanted to get in their own shots too.

So there can be no let-down as such, even during the return. Watches remain the same strict watches, and the G.Q.'s remain the same G.Q.'s. Air-patrols continue their patrolling. And, from the general look of things, we readily might be moving in for an engagement instead of having just finished one.

Yet, for all of that, there cannot help but be some difference, and it is most noticeable in the staterooms of the flyers at night. Their daily work is not ended, but the strain of their days of combat, and the tense build-up for it, has to undergo some reaction.

Their staterooms appear much as usual, though, and as usual too the flyers will be sitting around them in the same old shorts or in whatever they want to wear. Those who have to take the early patrol will turn in to get their sleep while the others con-

centrate on the gab fest. But it's the gab fest now which has more of a rowdy carelessness to it.

Some of the scuttlebutt holds out for some pretty wild things for our next assignment. Nor, once again, will there be any tangible basis for affirming them or denying them.

"But you just wait and see whether I'm right or not. You just wait."

It is the same old refrain, and we would have felt lonely without it. We would not have felt that we were aboard our carrier.

Another part of the nightly gab fests has to do with what a great time we will have when back in port. But even as we talk we know we are dealing in blarney. This is part of the game too. When on the Pacific one has to perform his social whirling through the imagination, and the further he is at sea from the base the more confidence he can throw into his own self-hypnotism.

For when back at the base itself, all hopes are definitely at a dead end. There is not even the chance of kidding oneself there. And he who talked the most ahead of time about what he would do is usually he who will remain aboard ship the most afterwards. Or at the landing field, wherever it will be.

But just the same somebody is going to arrange an amazing party ashore with actual girls in actual attendance. Judging from his descriptions they will be so numerous that we may have to get in more pilots from another carrier so that each girl may have a turn to dance. Each has her own "wheels" (meaning her own car), and each is desperately anxious to meet us, apparently, and desperately anxious to have her home become our home every minute we are in port.

These ship-dreams are harmless, nor is the awakening from

the dreams too harsh. The awakenings instead are gradual and, in a way, almost kind. We are allowed to come out of the ether day by day, the nearer we get to port, and not all at once. He who makes the highest promise when, for instance, we are still five days from port is also he who has the highest distance to climb down. But he doesn't jump down. In his descent he uses each day gradually, one at a time.

On the fourth day he expresses some doubt if the people who own the home which we are going to use will still be there when we arrive. But of course if they aren't there we can get another. That is simple.

On the third day from port he expresses a doubt if some of the girls he had in mind will still be around when we get there. But of course if they *all* aren't there they'll know other girls who are there.

On the second day from port he expresses regret that he hadn't thought of the party sooner. He was a fool not to have thought of the party sooner. If only he had known sooner that the flyers might want a party when they got back he could have fixed it all up before the carrier left. "God a'mighty, what a fool I was not to've thought of it. But we'll arrange something, you bet."

On the last day he comes right out with it: "Look, Harry, you used to live around here at one time, didn't you? Look, Harry, you oughta know some girls left around here. Look, Harry, how about it? Let's fix up something."

But the base, as we know only too well, will be the same sort of base as when last we left it, with the exception that now it will contain more military people and fewer women than the decimal-point of women which had been there before.

Women indeed have become so rare on the Pacific that even the photographs of them aboard appear as photographs of

something extinct. They could be something as valuable to a museum's collection, for example, as the last photograph of a buffalo herd crossing the Ohio, or of a Sioux camp.

So when finally we do get back in port, we know ahead of time exactly what we will be doing: we'll be working to get ready to go out again.

The pilots will fly the planes to some remote landing field. They will take off the carrier during our final dawn at sea. They will continue their practicing at the field. They will have night practice, and day practice, and target practice. And the planes will not be flown aboard again until, as usual, we are out at sea once more.

We're going to Burma this next time.

We're going to Korea this next time.

We're going to Mindanao.

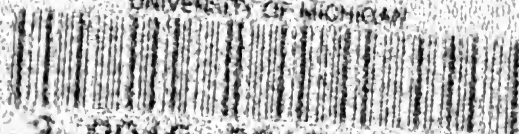
THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER is the dramatic new naval vessel of this war. Its development has revolutionized the techniques of naval strategy. Equipped with aircraft carriers, two huge task forces—one American and one Japanese—have twice fought major sea battles in this war without a ship on either side ever firing a gun.

Lt. Com. Max Miller of the United States Naval Reserve, in peacetime a writer of considerable repute, has here set down the whole feel of life at sea on one of the great American aircraft carriers on task-force duty. The carrier is any carrier. The battle is any battle. Here is the way the men of the carrier think and feel, from the moment of leaving port, through the long days of zig-zagging into enemy waters, the mounting tension as the moment of battle draws near, the furious hours of attack, the losses and the triumph, the return homeward. Here, on duty and at play, are the pilots and gunners, the plane-handlers and the ammunition passers, the flight officers and the chaplains—all the hundreds and hundreds of young Americans who work and fight the carrier, key weapon in modern ocean warfare.

The picture is authentic. Lt. Com. Miller spent many weeks at sea gathering this material, soaking up these impressions. He served in the navy in the last war and subsequently spent many years as a newspaperman in San Diego, California, covering the waterfront of this great naval base.

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